Rev James E. James.

IRON
MAN

By W. R. BURNETT

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IRON MAN

By W. R. BURNETT

Author of "Little Caesar"

LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
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TO

MY MOTHER AND FATHER

NOTE: The characters and events in this book are entirely imaginary.

SHEPHERD: . . . the mair I think on't, the profounder is my conviction that the strength o' human nature lies either in the highest or the lowest estate of life. Characters in books should either be kings, and princes, and nobles, and on a level with them, like heroes; or peasants, shepherds, farmers, and the like. . . . The intermediate class—that is, leddies and gentlemen in general—are not worth the muses while; for their life is made up chiefly o' mainners, mainners, mainners; you cannot see the human creters for their clothes; and should ane o' them commit suicide in despair, in lookin' on the dead body, you are mair taken up wi' its dress than its decease. *March 1829, NOCTES AMBROSIANAE*

PART I

I

Coke sat up, pushed back his hat, took his feet off the bed, and, getting up, stood yawning and rubbing his fists in his eyes. Across the room Regan was playing solitaire on a writing-desk, and Coke's sparring-partner, Jeff Davis, was sitting in a big chair by the window turning the pages of a magazine. Coke walked over to Regan and stood looking over his shoulder.

"Boy, you sure was cutting it," said Jeff. "A buzz-saw ain't got nothing on you."

"Sure," said Coke; "I always sleep like that." He bent over and stared at Regan's lay-out. "Play your ace of diamonds," he said.

Regan pushed him away.

"Don't bother me. I got a bet on this game."

Coke, still yawning and stretching, went back to his chair and lolled, flexing his fingers out of boredom.

"Say," he said, finally, "you guys are a hell of a lot of company."

Regan turned to Jeff.

"Ain't that a laugh!" he said. "That guy's been sleeping for the last half hour, and he says we're a lot of company."

"Yeah," said Jeff.

"Well, I'm awake now, ain't I!" exclaimed Coke.

"It's a wonder you guys couldn't think up something so I wouldn't get stale sitting around like this."

"Want me to dance for you?" asked Regan.

Jeff burst out laughing.

"Let me do it," he said.

"Think I'll smoke a cigar," said Coke.

"Better lay off them cigars," said Jeff; "you'll cut your wind."

"Let him go," said Regan. "That black boy'll cut his wind for him."

"The hell he will," said Coke, but he made no move to take a cigar.

Regan got up, lit a cigarette, and handed it to Coke.

"Now," he said, "don't say I'm always trying to cramp your style. Pull on this and get throat trouble."

Coke took the cigarette and sat smoking, perfectly relaxed, his eyes closed.

"That's just what I needed," he said.

Regan went back to his game of solitaire, and Jeff cocked up his feet and began to read an article in the magazine. As a rule he merely looked at the pictures. Coke opened his eyes.

"Hey, George," he called to Regan, "look at Jeff. That boy's gonna ruin his eyesight."

Regan turned and stared at Jeff.

"I didn't know they printed them kind of stories in magazines," he said.

"It's about the champ," said Jeff. "A lot of bunk. All about his knockout record. Who the hell'd he ever knock out except Tuffy Munn? And he was doped."

"Well, he flattened your nose," said Regan.

"Yeah; I slipped and ran into a left."

"Oh, God," said Regan, and went back to his game.

Coke sat puffing on his cigarette, then he got up and tossed it into an ashtray.

"I'd like to get a go at him," said Coke.

"Well," said Jeff, "all you got to do is knock Prince Pearl kicking."

"Yeah," said Regan, "that's all he's got to do."

"You think I won't, don't you?" said Coke, leaning over Regan's chair.

Regan put down his cards, opened the drawer of the writing-desk, and took out a pile of newspaper clippings. Coke knocked them out of his hand.

"Good Lord, George," he said, "ain't you been in the game long enough to know that them newspaper guys don't know straight up? The hell with them clippings."

"Well," said Regan, "all the smart money's on the black boy. That's something."

"All the smart money was on Willard once, too, wasn't it?" said Coke, flushing. "You guys give me a pain in the neck."

He went into the bathroom, banging the door.

"Boss," said Jeff, "why don't you lay off of him? You know he's on edge."

Regan turned and stared at Jeff.

"You let me handle him, Jeff," he said. "I know that bird better than anybody in the world. Listen, he's got a chance to win. A small chance, I'm saying; but

a chance just the same. It ain't no walkaway like all these guys think. But I don't want him to pass up the only chance he's got by getting overconfident."

"Ain't much chance of that, with you at him all the time."

"All right," said Regan; "but you don't know that guy. Why, when he put on his first pair of gloves he thought he'd be champion in a week."

"Well," said Jeff, "that's the old spirit."

"Yeah," said Regan, "that's the old spirit that leads to busted noses and pretty ears."

"I'll say he's got a kick in that left of his and his right don't tap you," said Jeff.

"Sure," said Regan, "but he's got to land 'em. That black boy's hard to hit. He'd make a monkey out of the champ if he'd give him a match."

Jeff laughed.

"Don't you never worry about Mike Shay fighting the nigger. He'd left jab him to death."

"Well," said Regan, spreading out his hands, "what do you think he'll do to Coke then?"

"I think he'll decision him," said Jeff; "but Coke won't even know he's been hit."

"Hell," said Regan, "you dumb pugs are all alike. If a guy can take it, why, that's all you care about. You can't win a fight by taking 'em on the chin. If you could, you'd be champion."

"There you go," said Jeff.

Coke came back into the room, scowling.

"Well," he said, "have you fight experts got me knocked out yet?"

Regan went back to his game.

"I'm backing you," said Jeff. "I'm gonna bet a little money on you."

Coke patted him on the shoulder.

"Bet a lot, Jeff," he said.

"Yeah," said Regan, "and I'm setting my checks in on the nigger. He'll have his left in your face so much you'll think it belongs there."

Coke stood staring at Jeff and slowly nodding his head.

"Jeff," he said, "I been that guy's meal ticket for God knows how long. Ever since I left the factory. And that's the way he hands it to me. You bet on that nigger, you cheap shanty mick, and I'll give you the lacing of your life."

"He ain't gonna bet on the nigger," said Jeff. "He's just talking."

"Ain't I!" said Regan.

"Go ahead," said Coke. "That'll be all the more reason for me to paste him. Go ahead."

Regan went on with his game for a moment, then he turned to Coke.

"It's about your bedtime, ain't it?"

Coke glanced at the clock.

"Yeah; but I don't feel much like sleeping."

"Want to play some auction pinochle?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Coke; "I'm off of cards."

"You're about off of everything, ain't you?" demanded Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke; "including you."

Jeff got up and stretched, tucked his magazine under his arm, and started for the door.

"Well," he said, "I think I'll go over to the Majestic and grab me a girl. Want to go along, George?"

"No," said Regan; "I dance like Coke boxes."

"Aw, lay off of me," said Coke, flaring up.

"So long," said Jeff, going out.

Coke and Regan sat in silence for a long time; Regan playing solitaire, Coke sulking. Finally Regan put away his cards and turned his chair around.

"How you feeling, Coke?"

"I'm O.K."

"You gonna fight that guy like I told you?"

"I'm gonna fight him to suit myself."

"I guess you don't want to be champion."

"Listen," said Coke, "if you was such a hell of an expert you'd be out there yourself getting the jack instead of me."

Regan got up.

"All right, swellhead," he said. He went over to the closet and got his overcoat and hat. Coke, sulking, watched him out of the corner of his eye. Regan put on his overcoat and started for the door.

"Listen, George," said Coke, "stick around a while, can't you? I don't feel like sleeping."

"No," said Regan, "I got to be going."

"Come on, George," said Coke, "stick around. Lord, don't you know I get to feeling low when I'm training?"

"Now start your bellyache," said Regan. "To hear you talk you'd think you really did some training. Suppose you had trouble making weight like some guys. Two days on the road and your weight's O.K. Lucky and don't know it."

"All right," said Coke. "I don't train hard, but it makes me feel low just the same. Sit down, George, and let's have a talk like we used to."

Regan sat down without taking off his overcoat. Coke sat staring at the floor.

"Well," said Regan, "you don't seem to be doing much talking."

"George," said Coke, "ever hear anything more about my wife?"

Regan laughed curtly and got up.

"So that's the song!"

"Yeah. You know I get pretty lonesome for that kid."

"You're a hell of a man," said Regan.

"You don't know that kid."

"I know her better than you do," said Regan. "Listen, Coke, if I was you I wouldn't be wasting no time thinking about a dame that ran out on me because I couldn't buy her an automobile."

"Hell," said Coke, "she was used to things, see? You couldn't expect her to settle down and do housework."

"Yeah," said Regan, laughing, "she was used to bum hotels, and day-coaches, and three-a-day on a tanktown circuit. Where is she? Anybody ever hear of her? To hear her tell it you'd think Ziegfeld was begging her to take over the Follies."

"You never did like her, George," said Coke.

"No, I never did," said Regan. "And the biggest break you ever got was when she went away and left you."

"That's what you say," said Coke. "But you don't know how I feel about that kid."

Regan put on his hat.

"I'm leaving you, Coke," he said. "I'm sick of this song. Listen, take my advice; lay off that cowtown soubrette, she'll make a bum of you."

Coke ran his hands over his face and sighed.

"I'd just like to see her and talk to her."

"Don't worry," said Regan; "as soon as she needs money, you'll hear from her."

Regan started out the door, but the telephone rang and he turned back. Coke made a move to answer it, but Regan waved him away and took down the receiver.

"Hello," said Regan; "yeah, this is him speaking. Well, I don't see no reason why not. Sure, come on up." He hung up the receiver and stood looking at the floor.

"Who was it?" asked Coke.

"A couple of big shots, Mandl and Riley. They want to see us."

"What do you suppose them bums want?"

"Well," said Regan, "you can bet there's something up, because they don't tag after nobody."

"Maybe they want to look me over before they get their jack up."

"Oh, God," said Regan with his head in his hands.

Someone knocked at the door and Regan went over to open it. There was a bell-boy with the two gamblers, and he stood in the doorway, staring at Coke. Riley and Mandl came in, but the bell-boy didn't close the door. He stood staring at Coke.

"Say, Mr. Mason," he said, "my grandmother's gonna be awful sick the night you fight."

"All right, buddy," said Coke.

The bell-boy closed the door. Regan nodded in Coke's direction and said to Mandl:

"He eats it up.'"

"Well," said Mandl, "ain't that all right?"

Mandl was short, stocky and dark. His nose was slightly flattened and his lips stuck out like a negro's. His partner, Riley, was small, stooped and pale, with sandy hair and a thin, freckled face. They both wore diamonds and loud clothes. They sat down and Regan poured out a couple of drinks for them. Mandl cocked his head sideways and squinted his eyes at Coke.

"What kind of shape you in, Mason?" he asked.

"He looks in the pink," said Riley.

"He's rounding off good," said Regan.

"Yeah; I'm gonna plaster that nigger," said Coke.

Mandl passed around a monogrammed cigar case.

"Yeah?" he said. "The money's all the other way."

"Ain't nothing new about that," said Coke, scowling.

"No, course there ain't," said Riley, glancing warningly at Mandl, who was never very diplomatic.

"We figure we got a chance," said Regan.

"Well," said Mandl, "you can get all the money you want at three to one. New York's long on Prince Pearl since he stopped Joe Savella, and Chicago's crazy about him."

"Joe Savella ain't much," said Coke.

"Fair boy," said Riley.

"He had his own referee the night he got a draw with me," said Coke, "and at that I cocked him through the ropes in the second."

"He did; that's a fact," said Regan.

"Well," said Riley, "we was aiming to lay a little on your boy, Regan."

"What did I tell you," Coke exclaimed.

Regan massaged his chin and stared at Mandl and Riley. Nobody said anything.

"Well," Regan demanded finally, "what about it?"

Mandl flourished his cigar.

"Listen, Regan," he said, "what do you say we all make a clean-up?"

Regan laughed.

"Well, we ain't passing up no ready money. But what's the game?"

Mandl opened his mouth to say something but Riley beat him to it.

"Regan," he said, "winning don't do Prince Pearl

no good. You know that. He can't get a match with no Grade A guys because he's a nigger. Your boy's the only bird that ain't afraid of him."

"I ain't afraid of nobody," said Coke.

"Course you ain't," said Riley, soothingly. "Well, Prince Pearl's been after a match with the champ for over a year now and he can't get it. Mike's afraid of him and anyway nobody wants a shine for champ, see? Well, Pearl's no spring chicken any more. He admits to thirty-five, get the idea? He ain't dead set on winning from Mason, here. He thinks Mason's a good boy that ought to have a whirl at the champ . . . so . . ."

"I got you," said Regan. "He's willing to turn a back flip for a consideration."

"Sure," said Riley; "he'll take it easy for five grand and your boy'll get a shot at the champion."

Coke's eyes got big and he began to stare at Riley. Regan glanced uneasily at Coke.

"So there you have it," said Mandl. "It's a pipe. We'll clean up big, all of us, and Mason'll get a shot at the champ."

Regan massaged his chin and stared at the ceiling.

"Nothing doing," shouted Coke. "That nigger don't have to lay down. Where do you dollar boys get that crap? Why, you guys talk like I was a set-up. Listen, this fight's gonna be on the square. If that nigger looks like laying down, I'll take it up with the Commission, by God. I'll spill the whole story. I'm winning this

fight on the square. I'm gonna knock that nigger for a home run."

Riley was paler than usual and his little eyes darted from Regan to Coke. Mandl hit the table with his fist.

"For God's sake, Mason, don't be a sap," he said. "It's a chance for a clean-up."

"Well," said Coke, "if you guys want to clean up, why, take all the three to one you can get. I'm putting you wise, see? I'm gonna tie that nigger in knots."

Riley laughed.

"Listen, kid," said Mandl, "you ain't even a ten to one shot. Prince Pearl'll never get through hitting you."

Regan was still rubbing his chin. Riley turned to him.

"Regan," he said, "you always seemed like a pretty smart boy. What do you say?"

"Coke's doing the talking," he said.

Coke grinned at Regan.

"Well," said Mandl, getting up, "you guys are a hell of a lot dumber than I thought you was."

Riley got up also.

"Yeah," he said, "we thought we was doing you a favor."

"Well," said Coke, "what I said goes. If that shine don't fight his best, I'll spill something."

Mandl was furious. His sallow face was flushed and he breathed heavily.

"Yeah," he said; "he don't have to fight his best to lick you, Mason."

"Get the hell out of here you dirty kike," said Coke, taking a step toward Mandl.

Regan took Coke by the arm and jerked his thumb toward the door.

"You guys better beat it," he said. "But tell the black boy what Coke said. If this fight ain't on the square, you'll hear from us."

Mandl went out without a word, but Riley stopped in the doorway.

"Listen, guys," he said, "no use for us to get all het up over a little thing like this. Just a misunderstanding, that's all. So long."

He shut the door quietly. Regan began to laugh.

"What you laughing at?" Coke demanded.

"Boy, if you didn't tell 'em."

Coke grinned, very much pleased.

"I got to hand it you, George," he said, "for backing me up that way."

"We're pals, ain't we?" said Regan.

"You're damn right we are," said Coke, shaking hands with Regan.

Regan put on his hat.

"Well," he said, "I hope you lick that nigger because them wise boys'll have all their dough on him now."

"I'll lick him," said Coke. "Wait till he feels one of them left hooks I been practising."

Regan stood staring at the floor.

"We sure passed up something though, Coke," he said. "You'd've got a shot at the champ, sure."

"Lord," said Coke, "I don't want nobody laying down for me. If I can't beat 'em fair and square I don't want to beat 'em. I'm in this game because I like it."

"Well," said Regan, "you're about the only one that is."

Regan went out. Coke stood in the middle of the room, staring at the floor; then he undressed slowly, took a shower and got into his pajamas. Someone knocked at the door and Coke went over and opened it. It was McNeil, his trainer.

"Well, Coke," he said, "they tell me a couple of big shots was up to see you."

"Yeah," said Coke, "I showed 'em the gate."

"That's what the boss says. Well, I'll be up after you about six, Coke. We want to get a good stiff workout in tomorrow, then we can ease off."

"O.K.," said Coke.

McNeil left, and Coke shadow-boxed for a few seconds, practising his left hook. Then he climbed into bed.

"I guess I told 'em," he said, aloud. "They don't have to fix no fights for me."

He turned from side to side. He couldn't seem to get settled. Finally he gave it up and turning over on his back, put his hands under his head and lay looking at the reflection of the street-lights on the ceiling. He thought about his wife. Why didn't she write to him? She used to. Maybe she was sick. Maybe she was dead. At the thought of her lying dead, sweat stood out on his forehead and he sat up.

"I guess I better get up and smoke," he said.

He got out of bed, lit a cigarette, and sat staring down into Sheridan Road. Across the street was the Olympic Athletic Club where he was training. All the windows were dark, but there was a group of men standing down at the front door, talking. He watched them, wishing he could go down and talk "fight" with them. When his cigarette got so short that it burned his lips, he put it in an ashtray and got back into bed.

"I can't be laying awake this way," he said.

II

At the street door of the Olympic Athletic Club there was a sign which read:

COKE MASON TRAINING HERE
ADMISSION 25¢

Most of the North Chicago amateurs and semi-pros spent the day there. Gate-crashers and bums from as far west as San Francisco drifted in, and there was the usual crowd of loungers and out-of-work ordinary citizens. But the big shots were watching Prince Pearl, who was training on the South Side.

Three days before the fight the gambler, Riley, paid his two bits at the box-office and sauntered upstairs. It was late in the afternoon and Coke was just climbing through the ropes to spar with Jeff Davis. Riley found a chair, tilted his hat over his eyes, and sat chew-

ing a toothpick. The bell rang. Coke came out of his corner slowly, crouched, his chin on his chest, carrying his left low. Jeff came out fast and drove Coke all around the ring, peppering him with light lefts. Coke made no attempt to return the blows, but parried and blocked. Jeff, who looked in good condition, increased the pace, and continued to pepper Coke, who gave ground, ducked, parried and blocked. Riley shook his head and pushed back his hat.

Regan saw him and came over to talk to him.

"Well," said Regan, "what you doing way out here?"

Riley smiled.

"Just looking your boy over. He ain't much."

Regan took a chair and sat down beside Riley.

"He's getting better. He's just taking it easy."

"Why don't he hit that dub a couple?"

"Wait," said Regan.

Jeff pounded Coke around the ring, but landing very few clean blows. Suddenly Coke straightened him up with a left hook and banged him against the ropes with a jarring right. Then he went into his shell again. Jeff grinned at the crowd.

"Uh hunh!" said Riley.

He squinted and chewed on his toothpick.

"And listen," said Regan, "you're all wrong if you think that Jeff Davis is any dub. He fought ten rounds with Mike Shay before he was champion, and Joe Savella barely decisioned him. Jeff's getting old or you wouldn't see him in there."

"Yeah," said Riley, "he's a fair boy."

Jeff got Coke into a corner and gave him a lacing, but Coke came out with a rush, landed his left hook again and staggered Jeff with a right. The bell rang. Jeff climbed through the ropes followed by Coke. McNeil threw a bathrobe around Coke and took him back to the dressing-room. Speed De Angelo and a North Side boy got into the ring to give the customers a show.

Riley pushed his hat back and threw his toothpick away.

"Regan," he said, "you know I ain't throwing no money away. I been up and down at this game for twenty years, and I bet with my head. But I got a hunch on that bum of yours. I'm already in on Pearl, but I'm gonna hedge. Coke's got a chance."

"You said a mouthful," said Regan.

"Here's the idea," said Riley. "I been watching the nigger. He's fast as greased lightning and he'll hit that boy of yours so much it'll be a sin, but he won't hurt him, see? And he might run into one of them left hooks."

"He won't have to run into no left hooks," said Regan; "they'll be waiting for him."

Riley got to his feet.

"What do you say you and the kid let me buy you a meal tonight, Regan?"

"You can buy mine," said Regan, "but Coke's gonna stay upstairs where Mac can watch him."

"I'll have his sent up," said Riley.

"O.K.," said Regan; "much obliged."

"That's all right," said Riley. "I'll be over at the hotel."

Riley went out. A newspaper man came over to Regan.

"Say, Mr. Regan," he said, "wasn't that Urban Riley?"

"Yeah," said Regan.

The newspaper man took out a cigar and handed it to Regan.

"What's the good word, Mr. Regan?"

"Coke wins by a knockout."

"Aw, hell," said the newspaper man, "don't kid me."

"Well," said Regan, "that's my story."

Regan stood watching Speed De Angelo and the North Side boy for a moment, then he went back to Coke's dressing-room smiling to himself. McNeil was giving Coke a rubdown.

"Well, Coke," said Regan, "you gonna fight the way I told you?"

"Yeah," said Coke, "I think you got the right dope."

"Well," said Regan, "it ain't my dope exactly. I figured it out watching you fight."

Coke grinned and swallowed the bait.

"Yeah?"

McNeil pulled him to his feet and said:

"All right. Get your clothes on. Dress fast."

Coke began to dress.

"So you got the idea watching me fight, eh, George?" asked Coke, eager for more.

"Yeah," said Regan, "but I didn't want to tell you. I was afraid you'd get the swellhead."

"Lord," said Coke, "I ain't that kind of a guy."

"Say," said McNeil, "get them clothes on and cut the chatter."

McNeil's helper came in with a couple of newspapers.

"Boss," he said to Regan, "it's a sell-out."

"What?" demanded Coke, turning.

Regan took the papers.

"The Arena's sold out, Coke."

"Whoopee!" said Coke.

"You never give me them seats you promised me," said McNeil's helper.

"By gosh, that's right," said Coke. "Fix this guy up, will you, George?"

Regan glanced at McNeil's helper.

"All right. I'll fix this guy up. But no more, Coke. You're as hard on tickets as an amateur at his first fight."

"Well, I forgot about this guy," said Coke.

Coke pulled his sweater over his head, put on his cap, and then began to shadow-box, purposely bumping into McNeil, his helper, and Regan.

"Say, for God's sake," said McNeil, "take that hyena out and tie him someplace."

"Whoopee!" said Coke.

"All right, Coke," said Regan, "save some of that for your nigger friend."

"I got plenty," said Coke, bumping into McNeil.

"Yeah," said McNeil, "I heard that story before, and then in the third round you got to use everything but the needle on 'em."

Regan winked at McNeil.

"Listen to this, Mac. 'In spite of the fact that Prince Pearl is an overwhelming favorite in the betting and is almost sure to win, Mr. Mike Herbert, the promoter, announces that The Arena has been sold out. This is a tribute to Prince Pearl, a great fighter who has never got a square deal. The fans are behind him in spite of his color and . . .'"

"Aw, can that!" cried Coke, standing still and scowling at Regan.

McNeil smiled behind Coke's back and his helper stood staring with open mouth at Regan.

"Listen to this, Coke," said Regan. "'. . . our opinion is that Mr. Iron Man Mason is all build-up. He has a good knockout record and he has never been defeated, but he has only fought two or three men of any consequence . . .'"

"Where do they get that crap!" said Coke, scowling. "I fought better guys than that nigger ever fought. He couldn't K.O. a good flyweight. What did he do to Joe Savella? Decisioned him. What did I do to him? I beat the devil out of him. They had him all set to win, and he had his own referee and one judge, but it looked so bad they had to give me a draw."

"Alibi," said McNeil.

"You wait," said Coke. "I'm gonna hit that shine so hard they'll hear it out on the street."

"Well, I hope you can hit him," said Regan.

Coke stamped about the dressing-room swearing.

"He'll hit him, he'll hit him," said McNeil's helper.

"Go on," said McNeil, "you're through for the day."

McNeil's helper went out, looking puzzled.

Coke tore the papers out of Regan's hand and threw them on the floor.

"My!" said McNeil, "ain't he temperamental!"

"Well," said Coke, "it's enough to make a guy quit the game, when he sees his own friends pulling against him. Why, listen, Mac; that guy there's gonna bet on the nigger."

"Don't blame him," said McNeil.

"Wait a minute," said Regan. "I kind of changed my mind on that proposition. I was talking to Riley just now. . . ."

"Riley!" shouted Coke.

"Yeah," said Regan; "he was up watching you work and he thinks you got a small chance to win. His money's smart money, so I'm gonna put some of mine with it."

"Small chance, hell!" said Coke.

"Yeah, that's what he said. Small chance. But that's better than no chance, ain't it? Riley thinks you got a good left hook and if you'll fight cautious, like you was telling me, that maybe you'll land that hook hard, and then maybe you got Prince Pearl."

"Sure," said Coke; "I'm gonna fight my own way, like I said. Cautious for five rounds, and then in the sixth I'll open up."

"Now you're talking smart," said Regan, glancing at McNeil, who was trying to keep from laughing.

"Yes sir," said McNeil; "you just fight your own way like you said, and you got an even chance."

Coke was pacified. He grinned at them and said:

"Why don't you guys lay off of me and give me a break. Ain't I a meal ticket?"

"We're for you, Coke," said McNeil.

"O.K.," said Coke. "I think I'll go watch Speed for a round."

He went out. McNeil stood shaking his head.

"Ain't he awful!" he said.

"Yeah," said Regan; "you got to handle him like he was six years old."

III

"When we was weighing in," said Coke, "he says to me, 'How de do, Mr. Mason. How you feeling?' And I says, 'I feel good enough to knock hell out of you tonight.' And he says, 'I don't doubt it, Mr. Mason.' And then he shows them ivories of his. Oh, he's a nice boy, all right; a nice sweet boy."

McNeil, exasperated, said to Regan:

"For God's sake, George, put a muzzle on this guy."

"Let him talk," whispered Regan, looking down at Coke, who was stretched out on the table getting a final rub.

Beyond the dressing-room the crowd was roaring.

"What's on?" asked Coke.

"Your boy-friend Speed's giving some palooka a lacing," said Regan. "You're next."

"How'd Jeff come out?"

"Draw."

"Draw! Who the devil was he fighting?" demanded Coke, sitting up.

McNeil pushed him back.

"A young kid named O'Keefe. Clumsy and hard-boiled."

Jeff came in with a black eye and a grin on his face.

"They tell me you got a draw," said Coke.

"Yeah," said Jeff; "that kid's style bothered me. He's a comer, Coke. He looks clumsy but he's fast."

"Well, you look clumsy and are," said Regan; "you ought to walloped hell out of that kid."

"I'm not killing myself in a go like that."

"You ought to always fight your best," said Coke. "That's how I got where I am."

"That's a fact," said McNeil, loosening up Coke's leg muscles.

Nobody said anything. Regan and Jeff stood looking down at Coke. McNeil worked over him fast. Coke closed his eyes. There was a prolonged roar from the crowd. The dressing-room walls vibrated slightly.

"What the hell!" said Coke.

Jeff ran out of the dressing-room. One of the promoter's men passed him coming in.

"All right, Regan," he said; "get your boy ready."

"What's all the commotion?" asked Coke.

"Your boy Speed knocked a guy out in a ripsnorting go."

"Good for Speed," said Coke.

Jeff came running back.

"Speed won by a K.O.," he said.

"That's stale news," said Regan. "All right, Coke. Let's get going."

"Let the nigger go first," said Coke. "I ain't waiting on no nigger."

He jumped to his feet, shadow-boxed for a moment, then McNeil pulled a big, white sweater over his head and wrapped his bathrobe around him. The promoter's man went out.

"That's all arranged," said Regan. "He's on his way."

"I'm waiting till he's in the ring," said Coke.

McNeil opened his mouth to say something, but Regan motioned for him to be still.

"All right, Coke," said Regan. "Now get this. Mac'll do the talking between rounds. You listen to Mac. Don't forget, Coke. Fight cautious. Back away from him when he lands. Make him think you're afraid of him. If the crowd boos, let 'em boo."

"The hell with the crowd," said Coke.

"That's the spirit," said Regan. "Fight part of the sixth the same way if things go all right. Then open up."

"You watch me," said Coke.

There was a roar from the ring.

"There he is," said Regan. "Are you all set?"

"I'm set," said Coke.

Coke swaggered out of the dressing-room, followed by Jeff and McNeil with the paraphernalia. Regan waited until they got started and then he went to his ringside seat by another route.

Prince Pearl was sitting in his corner smiling and mitting the crowd when Coke climbed through the ropes. Coke got a big hand, which surprised him. He mitted the crowd and grinned.

"You got some friends in the mob," said McNeil.

"Yeah," said Coke.

"Well, that don't hurt none," said Jeff.

Coke sat staring at Prince Pearl, who sat erect and smiling, talking to his handlers. He looked nearly as dapper in his gray robe as he did in street-clothes. His silky hair was carefully brushed and pomaded. He was every inch a gentleman, as the press put it.

Coke was not a gentleman and everybody knew it. His face was red and coarse; his stiff, dark hair stood on end no matter how much he worked at it; and his brow was low and wide. He was too big in the shoulders; too small in the hips; and he had no neck to speak of. His eyebrows, each thick enough to make a mustache similar to the one worn by Prince Pearl, overhung his eyes, and when he was fighting he peered up through them. To Prince Pearl he was white trash.

The referee climbed through the ropes, followed by Soapy, the announcer, who began to bawl the usual introductions. Prince Pearl stood up and smiled; Coke followed him. The referee broke open a new box of

gloves; the taped hands were examined, the gloves tied on. The referee gave them the usual instructions, stressing the neutral corner ruling; a dozen flashlight pictures were taken; then the referee shoved the fighters toward their respective corners.

"I don't see how I'm gonna keep from killing him in the first round," said Coke, scowling.

"Don't go back on us, Coke," said McNeil. "We all got our dough on you. Get in there and stall, like you said. You can do all your killing in the sixth round."

"I'm on," said Coke.

The bell rang. Prince Pearl ambled out, smiling, and touched gloves with Coke; then he immediately led with his left, caught Coke flatfooted, and banged him on the nose. Coke retreated. There was a laugh from the crowd. Prince stepped back on the defensive, but seeing that Coke had no intention of leading, he was forced to lead. He led cautiously. Coke retreated, making no effort to counter. The crowd sank back. They had expected to see something, but here it was, just another fight.

"Bring on the Iron Man," somebody yelled.

Prince Pearl, puzzled, fought more carefully than usual, hardly using his right at all. Coke stalled around the ring, flatfooted, giving a very poor exhibition of boxing, and taking left jabs on the forehead. He clinched and stalled and took a series of light lefts, then he clinched again; leading but once during the whole round. When the bell rang he walked back to his corner, grinning. The crowd booed.

Prince Pearl sat erect on his stool, staring at Coke. He suspected something.

"You're right about that nigger," said Coke.

"Don't talk," said McNeil; "just nod or shake your head. You mean he's hard to hit?"

Coke nodded.

"Got a good defense, you mean?"

Coke nodded.

"You ain't tried to hit him much, have you?"

Coke shook his head.

The second, third, and fourth rounds were duplicates of the first. Some of the men at ringside stood up and shouted: "No contest! No contest!" The referee told Coke to mix it; it looked bad. But still Prince Pearl held off, leading and retreating, leading and retreating. He stayed out of clinches as much as possible, and in the clinches he spent most of his time keeping Coke from landing. Once or twice he stung Coke and made him counter; then either by slipping or swaying, he made Coke miss.

But a crowd hasn't any eye for boxing. A crowd wants action and bloodshed. At the end of the fourth round the patience of the crowd was exhausted. Men stood on the seats and bellowed.

A cynical radio-announcer informed his listeners that:

"Coke Mason is just another newspaper tough guy. I could lick him myself."

While Jeff worked on Coke, McNeil talked to him:

"How you feel, Coke?"

"Fresh as when I went in. But so's Pearl."

"Keep it up, Coke. You're doing fine."

"Good God! I can't keep it up much longer."

"Don't talk," said McNeil. "Only one more round, Coke; then you can cut loose. Maybe the nigger'll start shooting 'em this round."

Prince, following instructions from his corner, danced out and immediately began to lead, following up a left with a right. For the first time in the fight he was really using his right. He landed repeatedly, staggering Coke with blows to the head. The crowd bellowed. The radio-announcer got so excited that he said left when he meant right and vice versa, which didn't matter much as he couldn't tell a hook from an uppercut. Coke pedaled backwards, ducked, sidestepped, but kept catching them on the head and body. Prince worked him into a corner and peppered him. Coke clinched and shook his head. The crowd thought he was groggy. The roar from the crowd was steady; men were standing on the seats calling for a knockout. And as far as the radio-announcer was concerned the fight was over. Prince drove a hard left to Coke's mouth and drew blood. Coke backed away and, trying to sidestep another left, slipped and fell. The referee began to count. Then the bell rang.

McNeil and Jeff worked furiously over Coke, stalling.

"I got him," said Coke. "Watch him fold up when I hit him with that left."

Riley, who was sitting behind Regan, leaned forward and inquired:

"Is Coke stalling, or has the nigger got him licked?"

"Wait," said Regan.

When the bell rang for the sixth round Prince leapt into the ring, his eyes blazing. Coke met him and hit him a belt to the body that sent him spinning. The crowd got up and yelled. Prince lost his head entirely and stood in the middle of the ring and slugged with Coke. He threw his punches so fast that Coke didn't even try to parry or block them; he took them. The radio-man didn't know what it was all about and told his listeners that hell had busted loose. Prince started a straight right to the head, but Coke was watching for the blow and countered quickly with a left hook for the body. The blow landed squarely in the short ribs. Prince flinched and backed away. But Coke leapt after him, wide open, throwing punches from all angles. And they weren't wild swings. They landed. Prince folded up with a surprised look on his face. Cushions, hats, and newspapers sailed through the air, and Jeff grabbed McNeil and began to dance. At the count of nine Prince got to his feet and tried to back-pedal, covering up; but Coke leapt after him, flailing him. A hard left hook to the body, followed by a right to the head, sent Prince to the canvas again and he didn't get up. When the referee said "ten" the ring was full. Coke helped carry Prince to his corner; then he mitted the crowd, grinning. The referee held up Coke's hand.

The radio-man seized Coke by the arm and pulled him to the microphone.

"Say something, Mr. Mason," he said.

Coke grinned.

"What?"

"Oh, anything."

Coke stared at the microphone, then said:

"Hello, everybody. It was a tough go and I sure met a tough boy, a good game fighter. I was lucky to win. So long."

IV

"Good God," said Coke, "are you gonna work over me all night! You'd think I was the guy that took the count."

McNeil turned and looked at Regan, who was standing back of him.

"Coke," said Regan, "what's the big rush? You ain't going no place."

"That's all right," said Coke; "but you'd think I was a stiffy stretched out like this."

"Let him look you over, Coke," Speed De Angelo put in. "I had a busted rib once and didn't know it and I had a hell of a time."

"Yeah," said Jeff; "there ain't no rush."

Regan pushed Speed and Jeff toward the door.

"You guys beat it," he said.

But Coke sat up.

"You guys stick around," he said. "You're going with me wherever I go. Good Lord, we got to celebrate some, don't we?"

"The best thing you can do," said Regan, "is to go out to the hotel and go to bed."

"You would say that," said Coke.

McNeil pulled Coke to a sitting position.

"He's all right, George," said McNeil. "There ain't a scratch on him except that little cut on his lip."

"Whoopee!" said Coke.

Someone knocked at the door and Regan opened it.

"Coke," called Regan, "there's a bunch of guys here that want to see you."

"All right," said Coke, pulling on his pants; "let 'em in."

Twenty men crowded through the door, filling the dressing-room from wall to wall: reporters, amateurs, pugs, hangers-on, and plain citizens. One of the reporters came over to Coke.

"Got any plans for the future, Coke?"

"Yeah," said Coke; "I'm going after Mike Shay and make him give me a match."

One of the men pointed at Coke and said:

"Boys, here's your next middleweight champion."

"Yea!" yelled the crowd.

"How come you fought so slow the first four rounds, Mason?" asked another reporter.

"Well," said Coke, "I couldn't seem to get going."

"I thought he had you in the fifth."

"Yeah," said Coke, fumbling with his necktie; "he was sure throwing 'em fast in that round. Prince is a tough boy. Toughest I ever fought."

Regan held up his hands for silence.

"Listen," he said, "I don't want to disturb you guys, but I got to get Coke home, so he don't get pneumonia or something. We're staying out at the Allard Hotel, as you guys probably know, so come out whenever you feel like it and talk things over."

Coke shook all the hands shoved at him and grinned. Speed, Jeff, and McNeil worked the crowd out without appearing to do so. Regan stood with his hat tilted over his eyes watching Coke, who was putting on his overcoat and dancing.

"Whoopee!" said Coke. "Ain't we getting there?"

"Looks like it," said Regan.

"Looks like it, hell," said Coke. "To look at your face you'd think I lost."

"Well," said Regan, "don't get all puffed up. You got a break. If the black boy had kept his head he'd've decisioned you sure."

"Yeah," said Coke, taking Regan by the arm and waltzing him around, "but he didn't. Did you see my hook land in the sixth? Oh, baby!"

Regan pulled away from him.

"Listen, Coke," he said, "put your hat on and let's get out of here."

"All right," said Coke; "but I'm taking the boys out to the hotel with me and we're gonna have a feed or something."

"Sure," said Regan; "that's the idea. You leave it to me."

"Whoopee!" said Coke.

Holding up the skirts of his overcoat, he skipped about the dressing-room. Of a sudden he stopped and stood staring at the floor.

"Well," said Regan, "what took you?"

Coke didn't answer for a long time, then he said:

"You know, George, I was just thinking: I wonder where Rose is? Maybe she's sick or something."

"Well," said Regan, exasperated, "if she needs any jack you'll hear from her."

"Aw, there you go," said Coke. "You never got a good word to say for her. You don't know her, that's what I'm telling you. You don't know her. She's a good kid, George; only she's got big ideas. She wasn't gonna be no palooka's wife and I don't blame her."

"I wonder how it feels to be that dumb?" Regan asked the walls.

"George," said Coke, "sometimes I think you ain't human, the way you talk. Ain't you never been crazy about a woman?"

"I'm paying alimony, ain't I? You sap!"

Coke sat on the edge of the rubbing-table and looked up at Regan.

"George, the night she left me it was raining. I can remember just as well. It was the night that Akron bum decisioned me and they held up my money because they said I wasn't trying."

"I know," said Regan, impatiently.

"I was trying, George; only I didn't have nothing in my legs. You know. I was worried about that kid. I knew she was sick of where we was living and all that stuff. Well, when I got home she had her suitcase in the hall. No sneaking about her. Some guy had got her a job with a show."

"Yeah," said Regan; "one of her part-time boy-friends."

Coke flushed.

"George," he said, "if you wasn't my pal I'd lace you when you talk like that."

"Yeah?" said Regan. "Well, maybe I ain't no good in the ring, but I'm a pretty good rough-and-tumble fighter. You lace me and I'll lace you back."

"Aw, hell," said Coke, getting up and walking toward the door.

Regan followed him and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, Coke," he said, "forget that dame and you'll be O.K. She ain't no good. A dame that runs out on a guy when he's in tough luck ain't no good. If a dame's any good at all, that's when she sticks, see?"

Coke didn't say anything. He just stood there looking at the floor.

"Didn't I stick with you, Coke?" Regan went on. "Everybody said you was a bum and ought to go back to the factory. But I stuck to you and tried to make a fighter out of you. You had it in you, all right, kid. But suppose I'd've said 'I can't be managing no palookas' and let you go to hell. Where'd you be now? Didn't I lend you money so you wouldn't have to go

back at that ten hour a day grind? Yeah. I stuck with you, Coke. Now you stick with me. Go crying around after dames and you'll be just another bum."

Coke nodded his head slowly a couple of times; then he went out into the darkened corridor to hide the tears in his eyes. Regan followed him, closing the dressing-room door quietly.

Speed, Jeff and McNeil were waiting for them in Coke's car. Regan got into the driver's seat and Coke sat beside him.

"Well," said Speed, "where we going?"

Regan turned to Coke.

"Where we going, kid?"

Coke sat looking at his hands.

"I guess we better go out to the hotel, George. I'm kind of tired."

V

WHEN Regan came in, Coke dressed in pink pajamas and a dark red bathrobe, was sitting at the window looking down into Sheridan Road.

"Coke," said Regan, "I got all the papers I could buy. They're playing you up big. Looks like Mike Shay'll have to fight you."

"Yeah?" said Coke. "Well, I guess maybe I can make it interesting for old Mike.

"I'll take even money on you," said Regan.

"That's the talk, George."

Regan handed Coke a paper and they sat reading

the round by round account of the fight. Coke laughed.

"I never seen nothing like them fight experts. Listen, George: '. . . the new middleweight contender is a sluggish fighter and has to be stung into action.' Ain't that rich?"

"Yeah," said Regan; "listen to this: '. . . Mason lived up to his name and showed himself to be an iron man. After going down before a barrage of punches . . .'"

"I slipped," said Coke.

"'. . . in the fifth he came back fresher than ever and completely outfought and outgeneraled one of the smartest fighters in the ring.'"

They sat laughing over the papers.

"Hey!" shouted Coke, getting to his feet; "listen: 'Champion Mike Shay discusses next match with reporters. Says he may sign to fight Joe Savella, or the foreign middleweight, Larsen . . .'"

Regan took the paper away from Coke and stared at it.

"That's only a rumor, Coke," said Regan. "I already wired his manager."

"Yeah," said Coke; "that's good. Trying to dodge me, the dirty mick."

"Don't get all worked up," said Regan. "The newspapers're gonna play our game. Listen to what it says: 'It's hard to figure out why Joe Savella should be given a shot at the championship as he has dropped two decisions to Prince Pearl, and Larsen's record is

even less impressive. To our way of thinking Coke Mason is the logical contender.'"

"Whoopee!" shouted Coke.

"But that don't mean we'll get the match," said Regan. "Old Mike's a slick boy. If we do get the match, it'll cost us like hell and Mike'll take all the gravy."

"The devil with that," said Coke. "I'll fight him winner take all. I'll fight him for nothing."

"Aw, talk sense," said Regan.

Coke got up, took off his bathrobe and began to shadow-box.

"Look at that hook, George," he said; "that's the baby that'll put old Mike to sleep."

Regan watched Coke for a couple of minutes, then he said:

"Now run in and take a shower, you damn fool! And then get your clothes on. You ought to have a nurse."

Coke went into the bathroom.

PART II

I

JEFF lay stretched out on the lounge watching Speed and Regan, who were dancing with a couple of girls from a North Side theatre. Coke was sitting in a corner, smoking a cigar, and a little redhead, another one of the showgirls, was reading his palm.

Regan's partner broke away from him and began to dance by herself. Regan stood by clapping his hands in time.

"Step right up! Step right up!" said Regan. "The big show! The big show!"

Jeff sat up and said:

"Kick 'em up, kid. I want to give my eyes a treat."

"Say," called Coke, "cut out the rough stuff."

They all turned and looked at him.

"Yeah," said the redhead; "we can't hear ourselves think."

"Oh, God," said Regan.

Regan's girl stopped dancing and stood with her hands on her hips, looking at Coke.

"Am I bothering you, Mr. Coke Mason?" she inquired.

"No," said Coke, "you ain't bothering me. But this kid here's trying to read my palm and you got her all flustered."

"I can read your palm from here," said Regan. "You're a big bum."

"Oh, he is not," said the redhead. "He's got a wonderful hand. I was telling him he ought to take up intellectual pursuits."

"What's that?" asked Jeff.

"Don't mind him," said Coke.

"Well," said Regan, "I still want to know."

"He ought to read," said the redhead, "and cultivate his mind. He ought to be a newspaper man or something smart like that."

"Yeah," said Regan; "he ought to write poetry and crochet. That's about his speed."

"There you go," said Coke. "Why don't you lay off of me for a while?"

"Oh, he's only kidding," said the redhead.

"What does she mean, intellectual pursuits?" Jeff asked Speed.

Speed grimaced.

"Why bother me with that," he said.

"Say," said Jeff, "want to read my palm, sister?"

"I'm busy," said the redhead.

"Let me read it," said Regan.

"Oh, let's dance," called Regan's partner.

But the music stopped and a radio-announcer began to expatiate on the merits of a certain remedy for colds in the head. Regan twisted the dial vainly; there wasn't any jazz music on.

"I like victrolas better," said Regan's partner; "then you can get what you want."

"Say," called Jeff, "when you get through with Coke will you read my palm?"

The redhead pretended she didn't hear him. He shrugged and got to his feet.

"Well," he said, "I think I'll go out and get myself a sandwich or something. Who's hungry?"

"I am," said Regan's partner. "I could eat a horse."

"Well," said Regan, "Let's all go out and see if we can't find one."

"All right," said Speed. "Are you set, sister?"

"How about you two over in the corner?" called Regan.

"I'm not hungry," said the redhead.

"Neither am I," said Coke flushing.

"Well, that's that," said Regan. "We're on our way."

They went out. Speed called from the doorway:

"Watch your step, Coke. I lost a watch at a fortune-tellers once."

"He's awful," said the redhead.

"All they do is kid people," said Coke. "That's the way they have a good time."

"I get tired of people kidding, don't you?" said the redhead, still holding Coke's hand.

"Yeah," said Coke.

The redhead sat looking into Coke's eyes. He flushed and stared at the floor.

"You know," she said, "when they was telling me about you, I thought you'd be some kind of a roughneck."

"Yeah," said Coke; "most people thinks us pugs is no better than gunmen."

"Well," said the redhead, "that's because they just see you in the ring, beating some guy up. That's the way with us. They see us on the stage showing our legs, see, and they think we ain't respectable."

"I know," said Coke. "I used to know a girl that was on the stage. Fact is, I knew her pretty well and she was as nice as you make 'em."

"Sure," said the redhead. "What I say is: there's disrespectable people every place. On the stage and in the church. It's all the same."

"Sure," said Coke; "that's what I always said."

"Showing your legs don't make you disrespectable as long as you behave yourself. Same as prizefighting."

"Sure," said Coke.

The redhead held Coke's hand and stared into his eyes.

"You know," she said, "it does a girl good to meet a guy like you that don't think all showgirls is you know what. All most guys think about is getting fresh with you!"

"Yeah," said Coke; "that's what this girl I was telling you about always said."

"And she was right," said the redhead. "That's a fact. Always pawing you over, you know, and all that sort of thing. It makes you sick."

"Sure," said Coke, pulling his hand away and looking very uncomfortable.

"Of course," said the redhead, "when a girl meets a

fellow that treats her right and isn't always pawing around, why, that's different."

"Sure," said Coke.

She smiled at him and he grinned.

"You look just like a little kid when you grin," she said. "I feel like mothering you."

She got up, sat on the arm of his chair, and ran her fingers through his hair. He sat there for a moment, blushing and biting his lips, then he put his arm around her gently. She slid down into his lap.

"Oh, Coke," she said, "what are you doing?"

Coke tried to smile.

"Nothing," he said. "You ain't sore are you?"

"No," she said. "I know I can trust you."

"Sure," said Coke.

She sat there, looking into his eyes, running her fingers through his hair, talking to him at random. Finally he kissed her. She drew back.

"Bad boy," she said. "After mama trusted you. Mama's gonna get right up."

But she made no move and in a moment Coke kissed her again. This time she said nothing, but as Coke hesitated and drew away slightly, she got to her feet and began to turn the dial of the radio.

"I think we better dance after that," she said.

Coke got to his feet, took her in his arms very carefully and began to shuffle about to the radio music. Pretty soon he said:

"You ain't sore at me, are you?"

"I ought to be," she said.

"But are you?" Coke insisted. "I'll behave."

The redhead didn't say anything and they danced on.

"Are you?" demanded Coke.

"Not exactly," said the redhead.

In a little while the bunch came back and found them dancing.

"Well," said Regan, "how's the palmist and her victim."

"Yeah," said Speed; "have you decided to take up them pursuits yet?"

"Aw, lay off," said Coke.

When the girls had gone to make their show, Regan took Coke over to the window away from Speed and Jeff and said:

"Well, did I keep the bunch away long enough?"

"What?"

"Oh, don't act dumb. Did you have plenty of time with the redhead?"

Coke stared at Regan, then he said:

"You got that kid wrong, George. Why, I kissed her a couple of times and she began to get sore."

"Oh, God!" said Regan, holding his head.

"That's the way with you, George," said Coke; "you think everybody's disrespectable. Just because a girl gets up on a stage and shows her legs, why, you think she's in for anything."

Regan looked at Coke for a long time, then he put on his hat and went out.

"What's the matter with the boss?" asked Speed.

"Oh," said Coke, "he's just sore because I told him a few things."

II

Speed pulled a sweater over his head and sat at the ring side, watching Coke and a North Side lightheavy. Coke, who never pulled his punches, was trying to keep from killing the young North Sider. Regan and Riley were sitting near Speed, talking. Since the Prince Pearl go, Riley had been spending a good deal of time with Regan. He thought Coke was the coming champion, and said so. Regan wasn't so sure.

"He's certainly got a mean left," said Riley.

"Look at that," said Speed, turning to them.

Coke had jolted the lightheavy with a left hook and the lightheavy was backing away, holding up his gloves.

"I got enough," he said.

McNeil put a sweater over Coke's head, and Coke climbed out of the ring.

"Hello, Mason," called Riley.

Coke came over to them.

"Well," said Regan, "still picking on cripples."

"My hand slipped," said Coke. "I didn't mean to land so solid."

"How's the legs?" Riley inquired.

"A-one," said Coke.

"Go take a shower," said Regan, "and we'll run over and get a lunch."

"On me," said Riley.

"I'll take you up on that," said Coke. "I could eat sawdust."

Regan turned to Riley.

"It's a good thing that bird's a natural," he said. "If he had trouble making weight it'd be just too bad."

"I like to eat," said Coke.

"Who don't?" said Riley. "I used to be a big eater myself, but my stomach went back on me."

One of the employees of the club came over to Regan.

"Somebody wants Coke on the phone," he said.

"Man or woman?"

"It's a man."

"Somebody want me?" asked Coke.

"Yeah," said Regan.

"Go talk for me, George. It may be that redhead."

"Got the gals chasing him now, hunh?" said Riley.

"Yeah," said Regan; "he's a regular killer."

"Go ahead, George," said Coke.

"It's a man, dummy."

Coke went to talk on the phone.

"Listen," said Riley, "I didn't know you managers liked to have your boys thick with women."

"Well," said Regan, "it's a long story."

"Something special?"

"Yeah," said Regan. "His wife ran away and left him, and he can't get over it. She was just a plain digger, but you can't make him believe that. I thought

maybe if I could get him interested in a couple of kids I could watch, he'd be a lot better off."

"Yeah," said Riley; "but it's risky."

Coke came running back, scowling.

"George," he said, "it was the redhead. She had some guy ask for me so I'd come to the phone. George, you got to help me out with that baby. She's sore at me."

"Well," said Regan, "I'll do what I can. Why don't you tell me things?"

"She's gonna sue me or something," said Coke. "Good God, George, you know I can't have nothing like that getting out in the papers. Suppose my wife'd see it?"

Regan glanced at Riley, who got up, lit a cigar, and walked away whistling.

"What's she gonna sue you for, Coke?" asked Regan, trying to be patient.

"Breach of promise or something. Hell, I never promised her nothing. All I did was be nice to her till she kept after me and after me. You know I thought she was one, nice respectable girl, but, say . . . !"

"Never mind," said Regan. "I can imagine the rest. Listen, Coke, does she know that you're married?"

"No. I never told her."

"Did you ever write her any letters?"

"No," said Coke, "I never had to. She was always calling me up and giving me passes to the show and taking me to meet all her girl friends, and . . ."

"Never mind," said Regan. "The next time she calls up tell her to go to hell."

"But, good Lord, George," said Coke. "I can't do nothing like that. You can't just tell a girl to go to hell after you been running around with her like I have. She was crying when she was talking to me. She feels pretty bad, George, because I been dodging her."

"All right," said Regan, wearily; "you leave her to me."

Coke put his arms around Regan.

"Boy," he said, "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you. She's coming up to the hotel as soon as her act's over. You be there, George, won't you? I'll take a whirl out to The Arena with Speed. There's a couple of boys on the card we want to see work."

"All right," said Regan; "but after this, tell me things, see? Tell me things. It'll save us both a lot of grief."

"There ain't gonna be no next time for me," said Coke. "I'm off of women. Why, to hear her talk you'd think she was the nicest kid that ever lived, but, say . . . !"

"Never mind," said Regan. "You go take a shower and get a good rubdown."

Coke hugged Regan.

"George," he said, "I got to hand it to you. You're one smart boy."

When he went to the dressing-room, Regan motioned for Riley to come over.

"Riley," he said, "you're my lawyer."

"How come?"

"One of Coke's women has been cutting up and now I've got to settle her. You're my lawyer, see?"

"All right," said Riley; "murder barred."

III

Speed, Coke, Regan and Riley had dinner together at the hotel, then Speed and Coke went back to the club to wait for Jeff. They were going out to The Arena and Jeff had Coke's car. Regan and Riley bought two quarts of gin from a bell-boy and went upstairs to drink it.

At eight o'clock the clerk called up and said that there was a woman downstairs to see Mr. Mason, and Regan told the clerk to send her up.

When Regan let the redhead in he said:

"Hello there, Miss De Vere. Just the lady we wanted to see. Meet my lawyer, Mr. Riley."

Riley got up and bowed.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

The redhead glanced about the room, then smiled at Regan.

"Where's Coke?" she inquired.

"Coke's awful sorry he can't be here," said Regan; "but he's in a conference."

"Oh, he is!" said the redhead. "Well, that's mighty funny. He told me he'd be here when I got here."

"Well," said Regan, "if you'll have a chair, I'll explain."

The redhead sat down, looking suspiciously at Riley and Regan.

"What you got a lawyer here for?" she demanded.

"That's just the point, Miss De Vere," said Regan. "We chased Coke because we didn't want him to get all riled up. He's gonna fight again pretty soon and we got to be careful."

"Well," said the redhead, "you men are all mighty considerate of each other. But I ain't got nothing to talk over with you two. My business is private."

"We understand," said Riley, pouring himself a drink. "How about a drink?"

"No," said the redhead.

Regan settled himself in his chair and shook his finger at the redhead.

"Listen, Miss De Vere, what kind of a mess have you got yourself into with Coke?"

"Mess! I'm in no mess."

She looked from Regan to Riley and back again.

"Say," she inquired, "what's this all about?"

"Well," said Regan, "my lawyer just got a communication from Sandusky, Ohio—that's Coke's home, you know—stating that Coke was way behind on his alimony and wouldn't pay up."

"Alimony!" cried the redhead.

"Yeah," said Regan; "and if Coke don't pay up, they're gonna send him to prison. But the point is, Coke's broke. That boy gets rid of money faster than nobody else. He no sooner got his split for the Prince Pearl go than he lost half of it on the stock market."

"Yeah," said the redhead, "now I'll tell one."

Regan turned to Riley.

"Have you got them figures with you, Mr. Riley?"

"No," said Riley; "I left 'em down at my office."

"Well," said Regan, "it don't matter anyway, because that don't concern Miss De Vere. But, listen, Miss De Vere, I'll bet you'll be interested in the rest of it. Don't you, Mr. Riley?"

"Yeah," said Riley. "She'd be funny if she wasn't."

"All right," said the redhead; "let's have it."

"Well," said Regan, "Coke's wife has had a guy over here watching him and she's got a full report on everything he does. See? She's got your name and what you do and how much you make."

"What!"

"I'm not kidding you," said Regan. "My lawyer had a long talk with her representative, didn't you, Mr. Riley?"

"I sure did. And he's hardboiled."

"Well," said Regan; "here's the point. Coke's gonna be served with a writ some time this week. But Coke hasn't got a dime. You know what I mean. He's got some money, but not enough. Well, the missus thinks he's been spending his dough on you, so she's gonna get a writ of attachment against your bank account."

The redhead jumped to her feet.

"What! Say, this is a mighty nice mess this dumb pug got me into. Say, he never spent over ten dollars on me at one time in his life. We used to eat at sand-

wich shops and places like that. Say, what kind of a frame-up is this?"

"Now wait," said Regan; "don't get all excited. Here's the idea. You just leave it all to us, see? And we'll straighten it out. I got a little money and my lawyer here thinks that guy from Ohio is crooked and maybe we can get to him. You just lay low, see, and say nothing. If Coke calls you up or anything, tell him you don't want nothing to do with him, see? You know how dumb he is. He thinks money grows on trees and he'd just as lief be served with a writ as not."

"No fooling," said the redhead, looking from one to the other. "Are you gonna help me out?"

"Sure thing," said Regan. "We ain't gonna stand around and see you get gypped when we know you're O.K."

"Say," said the redhead, "I always did think you were a good guy underneath all that kidding you put on."

"Sure," said Regan. "I kid a lot, but I don't mean it. I'm for you, sister. Only do as I say. Stay away from that dumb pug of mine."

"You watch me," said the redhead, smiling. "If he ever gets near me again it'll be because I didn't see him first."

"That's the talk," said Riley. "Now how about a little drink."

"No," she said. "I think I better be getting out of this hotel. That guy might be hanging around or something."

Regan turned to Riley.

"Smart girl, Mr. Riley."

"You bet your life, Mr. Regan."

"Well," said the redhead, "I'm on my way. Goodbye, Mr. Regan. If you fix me up you got a friend for life. Why don't you drop over to my place and see me some night?"

"Maybe I will," said Regan.

When she had gone Regan turned to Riley and they both burst out laughing.

"Regan," said Riley, "I never heard such a line in my life. It's a good thing that kid's dumb."

"Oh, Lord," said Regan; "it was a lot easier than I thought it'd be. Didn't she grab the bait, though?"

"Yeah," said Riley. "But it's a shame to give a cute kid like that the oil."

"There you go," said Regan.

"I think maybe I'll drop over and talk business with her some night," said Riley.

IV

When Coke came in, Regan was lying on the lounge asleep, and Riley was in the bathroom taking a bath and singing loudly. One of the chairs was overturned, Riley's clothes were piled in the middle of the floor, and pieces of torn-up newspapers were scattered all over the room. Coke took Regan by the shoulders and shook him.

"George! George!"

Regan opened his eyes, stared blankly for a moment, then sat up.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Coke shook him hard.

"What do you mean getting drunk!" he shouted. "Don't you know that stuff's poison to you. I thought you told me you wasn't gonna get drunk no more."

"Celebrating," said Regan with a sickly grin. "Where's my lawyer?"

"Aw, shut up," said Coke, pushing him back on the lounge.

He hated to see Regan in that condition. It made him feel queer. When Regan was drunk, Coke felt helpless.

Riley came out of the bathroom with a towel around him, dancing.

"How do you like my figure?" he demanded.

"Say," said Coke, "get your clothes on before you get pneumonia. Say, what was you guys trying to do, anyway, tearing up all them newspapers?"

"Celebrating," said Riley. "We won a great legal battle."

"We had to have confetti," said Regan.

Coke pulled Regan to a sitting position, stripped off his clothes, and, taking him under the arms, carried him into the bathroom and put him under the shower. Regan bellowed when the cold water hit him.

"Take it like a man, you bum," said Coke. "God, I can't go away and leave you a minute, you got to go and get drunk."

"Let me out of here," cried Regan, struggling.

But Coke held him under the shower. Riley came in, half-dressed, to watch.

"Say," said Riley, "don't drown him, champ. He's a good friend of yours. A legal friend. A celebrating, legal friend. Chief confetti maker of legal celebrations."

"Aw, shut up," said Coke, pushing Riley away.

Riley went back and finished dressing. When Regan had begun to come around, Coke took him out and made him put his clothes back on. Regan sat down without a word and lit a cigar.

"Well, Coke," he said, "we fixed the redhead for for you."

"Looks like it," said Coke.

"We did that," said Riley. "We fixed her good and plenty. We are legal gentlemen. Celebrating, confetti-making, legal gentlemen. Where did you say she lived?"

"Riley likes her," said Regan, laughing.

"She has such beautiful eyes," he said.

Riley and Regan burst out laughing. Coke sat glaring at them.

"A couple of fine, whiskey micks," he said.

"Gin," said Riley.

And they burst out laughing again.

"Well," said Coke, "all I got to say is, you sure made yourself at home in my room. By God, it looks like the A. E. F. marched through here."

"Don't get sore, champ," said Riley.

"Don't call him 'champ,' " said Regan. "His head's big enough now."

This sounded more like a sober Regan, and Coke grinned.

"All right, George," he said.

V

"WELL," said Regan to Speed, "I guess we might as well break the bad news to Coke now as any time."

"Yeah," said Speed. "That sure is a tough break, George."

"I don't know," said Regan. "It'll make a match with the champ more certain. Mike'll lick Joe to a standstill. You know that."

"Sure," said Speed. "Mike knows it too. That's why he picked him."

"I know," said Regan.

Then he turned to Jeff and said:

"Jeff, go and see if Mac's through with Coke. If he is, tell Coke I want to see him."

Jeff went out into the dressing-rooms back of the fight hall. A couple of North Side amateurs were in the ring swinging wild at each other.

"Look at them bums," said Speed.

"Well," said Regan, "they got to learn. Coke was worse than that when he started. He thought all you had to do to win a fight was to rush in swinging both fists."

One of the amateurs connected and the other got a bloody nose.

"You mind if I go a round or two with Dugan?" asked Speed.

"No," said Regan; "only box, don't fight. If that mick gets sore and starts to swing, tie him up."

"Watch me," said Speed.

Dugan and Speed climbed through the ropes and went at it. Jeff came back with Coke, who was grinning. When he saw the expression on Regan's face, the grin disappeared.

"What's the matter, George?" he asked.

Regan handed him a newspaper and pointed.

Coke read:

"Joe Savella signed for a championship go with Mike Shay."

Coke looked stupefied.

"Well," said Regan, "that's that."

"Yeah," said Coke; "the yellow mick. I told you he was afraid of me."

"You'll get a shot at him, Coke. Just keep your shirt on."

Coke sat down and looked at the floor.

"The newspaper boys are already razzing Mike," said Regan. "If he don't plaster Joe in jig time there'll be an awful noise."

"Well," said Coke, "I don't care who wins. I can lick both of 'em in one night."

"Sure you can," said Jeff. "I can lick 'em myself."

"Sure you can," said Coke.

"Say," said Regan, "cut out the back-slapping, you birds, and let's talk business."

Jeff smiled and struck at Regan; then he got up and stood watching Speed and Dugan, who were bouncing about the ring just above them.

"Listen, Coke," said Regan, "how'd you like to fight on the same card with Mike?"

"What!"

"Sure. What do you say?"

"You must be crazy. I fight main-gos."

"Listen," said Regan; "this is a chance to show Mike up. I can get you a match with that Norsky bum that Mike almost picked. He needs the money. You can plaster him in one round and then give Mike the laugh."

Coke began to smile.

"Yeah?"

"Sure," said Regan. "Wainwright wired me from New York about it. Everybody down East wants to see you get a break. They're sick of Mike Shay."

"By God, I'll do it," said Coke.

"All right," said Regan.

They sat watching Speed and Dugan. Speed was giving the Irish boy a good lacing. When the bell rang, they shook hands and climbed through the ropes. Speed came over to Coke.

"Tough luck, old kid," he said. "You'll make it yet."

"Thanks," said Coke.

Coke and Regan sat for a long time without speaking. Regan began to watch Coke. He knew that when wrinkles appeared in his forehead he was doing some heavy thinking. Finally he inquired:

"What's on your mind, Coke?"

"You know," said Coke, slowly, "I was just thinking maybe the missus would be in New York. She always wanted to live there."

Regan rubbed his chin and stared at the floor.

"Yeah," said Coke. "Course I ain't gonna hunt her up, because she may be off of me for life. Only maybe I might see her or something."

"Yeah," said Regan; "New York's just a little place. You'll probably run into her at the main corner."

"You never know," said Coke.

VI

Regan talked at the door of the dressing-room with a New York reporter who had evidently never heard of Coke Mason. Regan, somewhat irritated, handed out one of his best cigars and gave the reporter the story of the Prince Pearl go with trimmings, and intimated that the young reporter, lately assigned to the sporting page, would see a fight tonight that would make his hair stand on end.

"Coming east," said Regan, "we had to take a stateroom so that boy of mine could work out. He's perfecting a punch that'll knock 'em silly and he won't let up for a minute. The boy's ambitious."

"Do you expect to get a match with Mike Shay?" asked the reporter.

"Yeah," said Regan, "unless he dies of fright after what he sees tonight."

The reporter laughed. Someone had told him that fight managers were great kidders.

"Well," said the reporter, "they tell me that Larsen's a comer."

"Well," said Regan, "you just keep your eyes open out there tonight and you'll see things."

Big Tim Morgan, the promoter, intercepted the reporter as he was leaving Regan and said:

"Before you print anything that bird says, kid, verify it, verify it!"

The reporter laughed and went back into The Coliseum. Big Tim offered Regan a cigar and leaned against the corridor wall for a talk. Regan put his hand on Tim's shoulder.

"Tim," he said, "that don't look like no capacity house to me."

"What do you care?" said Tim. "You ain't on percentage."

"No," said Regan; "but it's mighty funny a Grade A fixer like you, with all your ballyhoo, couldn't get a capacity house out for the champ."

"Mike's getting old," said Tim. "He's too smart for the comers, but the boys are getting sick of seeing him decision everybody. It's on the square, but they want decisive wins, see, knockouts."

"Sure," said Regan. "Well, they're gonna see one knockout tonight."

Big Tim laughed.

"Don't try to kid me about that boiler-maker of yours. Mike thinks he's all build-up. Anyway, I got it

straight from Sleepy that Mandl said that Prince Pearl laid down."

Regan laughed.

"Mandl had his money on Prince, Tim. How about that?"

"I don't know," said Tim. "I'm just telling you what Sleepy said. Sleepy bet a hundred on Larsen tonight."

"Send him around," said Regan. "I still got two grand that ain't working."

Big Tim looked at Regan suspiciously.

"Regan," he said, "the only thing about you is, you got a hell of a reputation. I'd take that two grand if I was on the inside. But I don't know Larsen's manager from Adam. He can't speak hardly any English, anyway."

"Well," said Regan, laughing, "I can't speak Swedish, so there you are."

"Tell you what I'll do just to keep you honest," said Big Tim. "I'll take one grand of that two. Honor bet."

"O.K.," said Regan.

"If I was you, Regan," said Tim, "I'd chuck that Ohio kid and concentrate on that little Chicago wop you got."

"You mean Speed."

"Yeah," said Big Tim. "I got a good spot for him on my next card. He stood the customers on their heads in that first bout."

"That's his fourth straight knockout," said Regan.

Beyond the corridor the crowd began to boo and laugh.

"Somebody's getting razzed," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Big Tim, "and it's only the second round. I was afraid of that match."

"You leave it to me, Tim," said Regan. "I'll pep your show up for you. I'll show you smart New York hicks a fighter. A gong to gong fighter."

Tim gave Regan a push.

"A gong to gong set-up fighter," he said.

Speed came down the corridor in a big, blue sweater.

"Hello, boss," he said.

Big Tim offered his hand.

"Nice fight, kid."

"Thanks," said Speed. "That boy I fought was all right. But he couldn't stop that left hook Coke Mason taught me."

Tim laughed and shook his head.

"You got 'em all working for you, haven't you, Regan?"

Regan shrugged and said to Speed:

"Tim thinks Coke's all build-up."

"That so?" said Speed. "Wait."

"Aw, hell," said Big Tim. "Well, I'm going back and watch the massacre. Get your boy out in good time, Regan."

He nodded to the two of them, and went down the corridor and out into The Coliseum. When he opened the door Speed and Regan heard the crowd booing loudly.

"Speed," said Regan, "come in the dressing-room with me. I'll talk to you, see, for Coke's benefit, and all

you got to do is say 'yeah?' and 'that so?' like you was surprised, see?"

"Sure; I got you."

When they went in Coke was sitting on the edge of the rubbing-table talking to McNeil and Jeff. He was all ready for the go, but seemed pepless. McNeil was begging him to take some exercises and loosen up. But Coke sat staring at the floor.

"Hello, Coke," said Regan. "All set?"

"Yeah," said Coke.

"He needs a shot in the arm," said McNeil. "He acts like he was out all night."

"Hell," said Regan, turning away; "I guess that boy Larsen ain't so far wrong in what he says."

Coke paid no attention.

"That so?" said Speed.

"Yeah," said Regan. "I was just over talking to Larsen and he told me that he thought Coke was yellow and couldn't take it."

"Yeah?" said Speed.

"He said that his manager told him the Prince Pearl go was fixed, but that Coke was so scared of the nigger in spite of that, that it took everybody in his corner to make him wade in."

"Is that a fact?" said Speed.

Jeff had got slowly to his feet and was standing listening to Regan with his mouth open. McNeil watched Coke, who was beginning to pay attention to what Regan was saying.

"Yeah," said Regan. "Larsen told me that he was

gonna knock Coke flat in two rounds so he'd be sure to get a whirl at Mike Shay. Of course I stood up for Coke. But Larsen said if I was wise I'd tie a can to him. Larsen bet two grand of his own dough on a knockout."

"Is that a fact?" said Speed.

Coke stood up and stared at Regan.

"You wait," he said. "I'll flatten that Dutchman if it's the last thing I ever do."

"Well, you better do it quick," said Regan, "because he's aiming to plaster you all over the ring the first round."

"Yellow, am I!" said Coke. "Yeah, I'm yellow. That goddam hunky or whatever he is'll think he got hit by a truck."

"I don't know," said Regan. "Maybe we better fight cautious, Coke."

"Like hell we will," Coke shouted. "Not a chance. This is one time I'm gonna fight to suit myself, George Regan. I'm gonna murder that guy. I'm gonna hit him so hard the referee'll feel it. Yellow am I? I never seen a foreigner yet I couldn't lick."

"What do you think, Mac?" asked Regan.

"Well," said McNeil, "this Larsen's about the best puncher in the division. If he lands one of them rights, it'll be about over."

One of the Coliseum employees put his head in the door.

"Aw, you guys make me sick," said Coke, dancing on his toes.

"All right, Mr. Regan," said the employee.

"Coke," said Regan, "if you're dead set on fighting from gong to gong catch him with that left hook as soon as he steps in."

Coke pushed him away.

"I'll do my own fighting," said Coke. "All you guys do is carry tales, like a bunch of old women. I'm sick of the whole bunch of you."

He pulled on his bathrobe over his sweater and went out, followed by McNeil and Jeff.

Larsen was already in his corner. A big, slim, pale Swedish boy with a lot of curly, light hair and a bland smile. Coke climbed through the ropes and sat glaring across the ring at Larsen. Larsen smiled at Coke, then, noticing the glare, looked over Coke's head, turned and stared at the crowd, and then talked to his handlers. During the preliminaries, Coke never took his eyes from Larsen's face. Larsen seemed uncomfortable.

When Coke was introduced there was a ripple of applause; but Larsen got quite a hand. Coke turned to McNeil.

"Wait," he said.

"I'm with you, Coke," said McNeil. "I don't like foreigners no better than you do. Sock him for me."

Coke was so anxious to get at it that they could hardly keep him on his stool. When the bell rang he bounded into the middle of the ring, met Larsen, who came in cautiously, with a two-handed attack and drove him to the ropes. Larsen maneuvered himself out of a bad place and started throwing rights at Coke,

who took two on the head and a third on the chin. He staggered and went to his knees. The referee began to count, but Coke leapt to his feet, and, crouching and weaving, banged into Larsen, landed a left hook to the short ribs and upset him with a right. Larsen bounded up immediately, but, puzzled by Coke's wide open attack, he ducked to the left from a left hook and caught a jarring right on the head. This hurt him and he tried to cover up, but Coke was on top of him, wasting his breath swearing, and ripping rights and lefts into him. Toward the end of the round Larsen went down. The bell rang while the referee was counting.

Coke swaggered to his corner and sneered at the crowd.

"Bunch of bums," he said to McNeil; "thought they was gonna get a chance to boo me."

"Shut up," said McNeil. "You ain't as fresh as you think you are."

Jeff and McNeil worked over Coke, while the crowd continued to roar. Coke glared across at Larsen, who was pale and groggy. But Larsen's handlers were working on him fast and when the warning whistle blew, his head had cleared.

Coming up for the second round, Larsen was cautious, but Coke bounded into the ring, his left low, weaving and bobbing. Larsen back-pedaled, ducked, sidestepped, and covered up, but Coke was on top of him, pumping punches. Suddenly, Larsen, fighting frantically, missed a right swing, which Coke swayed

away from, but landed a left uppercut. Coke nearly went down, and before he could regain his balance, Larsen was banging him with body punches that smacked all over The Coliseum.

"My God," yelled somebody, "look at him taking 'em."

Coke did take them. He took them without staggering and in a moment began to return them blow for blow. The ring side had gone crazy. Newspapers sailed down from the gallery and there was a continuous uproar. Larsen began to fade. The pace was too fast for him. His handlers watched the time-keeper, and one of them kept shouting commands in Swedish. Larsen was driven to his knees by a right cross. He staggered to his feet and tried to cover up, but a hard left hook followed by a jarring right sent him down again. The referee dragged Coke to a neutral corner, then took up the count with the time-keeper. Larsen tried to prop himself up, but he was out. He turned over on his back and his right leg began to twitch. The bell rang at the count of nine.

Coke's legs were giving out, but he swaggered over to his corner and said to McNeil:

"One more punch and it's all over."

But he was tired and lay back with his eyes closed while Jeff and McNeil worked over him. McNeil looked across at Larsen. The Swede was lolling his head.

"The fight's over, Coke," said McNeil. "Your boyfriend'll never come up for number three."

When the bell rang for the third round, Larsen was

still on his stool, unable to get up. The referee came over to Coke and held up his hand. The crowd roared.

Larsen sat shaking his head, trying to smile.

"Coke," said McNeil, "go over and mit the Swede."

"What," said Coke; "after the way he talked about me!"

"Listen," said McNeil, "go mit him. He never said nothing about you. That was just some of George's bull."

Coke stared at McNeil, then got to his feet and went across to shake hands with Larsen, who was coming round.

"Good fight, kid," said Coke. "You almost had me in the first."

Larsen took the profferred hand, mumbled a few words in what he thought was English, and looked at the floor. The crowd applauded loudly.

"Atta boy, Coke," yelled the gallery.

When Coke climbed out of the ring Regan grabbed him and hugged him.

"That's the best fight you ever fought, Coke, old kid," he said.

"Yeah," said Coke, pleased.

"Listen, Mac," said Regan, "take Coke back, rub him down quick, dress him up warm, put that big white sweater on him, see, and send him out here. I got a seat for him."

"Yeah," said Coke; "I want to get a slant at Mike."

The crowd stood up to cheer Coke as he went out, followed by his handlers.

VII

Coke, in his big white sweater, flushed from his shower and rub, came out into The Coliseum, followed by Speed. Joe Savella was just climbing through the ropes. He got a fair hand. Coke started down an aisle, and Speed, standing in a dark entry-way, shouted:

"Yea! Coke Mason!"

Coke was greeted by a roar, and Joe Savella, thinking the applause was for him, got up and mitted the crowd again. By the time Coke reached his seat, nearly everyone in The Coliseum was standing, cheering.

Mike Shay, the champion, ready to enter The Coliseum from a far entry-way, turned to his manager and said: "Where do they get that stuff!" And went back to his dressing-room. His handlers followed him, remonstrating with him, but his manager, a fussy, little man, went to hunt for the promoter, Tim Morgan.

"I got some friends," said Coke, sitting down beside Regan.

"Yeah," said Regan.

Big Tim Morgan, flushed and puffing, rushed over to Regan.

"Say, Regan," he shouted, "what the hell kind of a side-show are you running?"

"Why, what's wrong with you, Tim?" Regan demanded. "I can't help it if the boy's popular, can I?"

"You're the damnedest crook I ever seen," said Big Tim. "Don't try to kid me."

"Well," said Regan, "you ain't in the game for your

health, are you? Match Coke with the champ and they'll stick up a soldout sign ten days before the fight."

The champion's manager came rushing over to Morgan.

"Mike went back to his dressing-room, Tim," he said. "I can't do nothing with him."

Regan burst out laughing.

When Morgan and the champion's manager had gone, Coke asked:

"What you pulling off, George?"

"Me!" said Regan.

Joe Savella was forced to wait over five minutes for the champion. The crowd grew impatient and began to stamp and whistle. Finally the champion climbed through the ropes, mechanically mitted the crowd, and nodded toward Joe Savella.

"This'll be one sweet fight," said Regan.

"I could lick 'em both," said Coke.

The championship match was a great disappointment to the crowd. Savella was cautious and forgot he had a right hand. The champion was sluggish and slow. The first five rounds were fought at such a slow pace that some of the customers got up and went home. The same old thing! Mike Shay letting somebody stay the limit and shading them at the final gong.

"Good Lord," said Coke, when they were coming up for the seventh round, "how'd that guy ever get to be champ."

"Well," said Regan, "he caught Tuffy Munn on a

bad night and knocked him out, and he's been stalling ever since. He's not as bad as he looks, Coke. He's a slicker."

"Hell," said Coke, "let's go. This ain't no fun."

"Let's wait till it's over," said Regan.

In the middle of the eighth round someone in the gallery began to yell:

"We want Coke Mason! We want Coke Mason!"

The cry was taken up and passed from aisle to aisle.

At the end of the eighth round Mike sat in his corner glaring at the crowd.

"There you are, Coke," said Regan; "he's got to fight you now."

The last rounds of the fight were not quite so slow, but they were just as even. Mike speeded up in the last round and batted Joe around a little, but Joe, a good counter fighter, began to land a left to the body and Mike changed his tactics. When the final bell rang, the crowd yelled:

"Draw! Draw!"

But the referee held up Mike's hand. Joe ran over and shook hands with the champion.

"Where you guys appearing next week!" somebody shouted, and there was a prolonged jeering.

"Well," said Regan, "that's that."

Coke and Regan started out, but Coke's path was blocked by a bunch of men who wanted to shake hands with him. Even Morgan offered his hand.

"You got a good boy here," Morgan said to Regan.

"Well," said Regan, "it cost you a thousand bucks to find it out."

"That's right," said Morgan. "I'll send you a check, George."

"Never mind," said Regan; "send me an I.O.U. and keep the money. That's a thousand I won't have to put up when Coke fights the champion."

VIII

JEFF tore the papers apart one by one and handed the sport sheets to Regan, who read them and passed them on to Coke. In every paper except one Mike Shay was severely criticized for his choice of opponent. One article started with the caption: "Mike used to dodge Prince Pearl. Now dodges Coke Mason. Color no longer excuse."

"Well," said Regan, "all we got to do now is promise Mike the Woolworth Building and the Statue of Liberty and maybe he'll fight you."

"He's got to fight now," said Jeff.

"I'll fight him winner take all," said Coke.

"Don't keep repeating that," said Regan. "You know that's just plain bunk. Anyway, I've given it out to the press. If they print it, Mike'll turn a back flip."

"Well, I mean it," said Coke.

"Smart boy," said Regan, getting up and stretching. "Listen, you might just as well pipe down about that winner-take-all stuff. It's gonna be Mike Shay take all win or lose."

"Well," said Jeff, "what's the difference? Coke'll lick him, and then Coke can grab the gravy."

"Oh, sure," said Regan; "all Coke has to do is walk into the ring and wave at Mike and it's all over. You bird's seem to forget that Mike Shay's the champion. If he wasn't champion he'd be bowling over a boy a week. Mike's no dub; he's a hell of a good fighter. But when a guy gets to be champion, he thinks in terms of dollars, not fights."

"I can lick him," said Coke.

The telephone rang and Regan went to answer it. It was Riley and he was excited. Regan listened to him with growing irritation and then, at the end of the conversation, he hung up the receiver with a bang.

"That's good," said Regan. "That's one I didn't figure on."

"What's wrong?" asked Coke.

"Why, that slippery Irishman has signed to fight an over-weight match with Ray Bluhm in California."

Nobody said anything.

"Jeff," said Regan, "get that little wop bell-boy to get you a quart of gin."

"Say," said Coke, "you lay off that stuff, George. It's poison to you. Ain't you got no sense?"

"Shut up," said Regan. "I got to get some fun out of life."

PART III

I

SINCE Coke's knockouts of Larsen and Bat Cahill and his ten round decision over old Joe Savella he had become the most written-about prizefighter, outside of the heavyweight division, in New York. Every time he fought he filled The Coliseum, and Tim Morgan was as careful of his welfare as he had once been of Mike Shay's. The Savella fight, a boxing match which developed during the final rounds into a toe-to-toe slugfest had reached the front page. Newspaper men in deploring the commercialized atmosphere of the prize-ring always singled out Coke Mason as the one honest-to-God fighter in the business.

But Mike Shay was still elusive. He had a busted rib; or his manager thought that he ought to go south; or he was matched for an overweight go. The truth of the matter was, that Mike was putting on weight and finding it difficult to stay in the division in which he was champion. He was trying to get high in the lightheavy class before he took a chance on losing his title.

Riley, Regan and Morgan kept after Mike's manager and reported all their doings to the sports writers, who had no love for Mike Shay. Boxing commissions in several states demanded that Mike Shay defend his title by a certain date or lose it. But Mike crossed

them all by getting banged up in an automobile accident.

This was a front page item and when Regan read it, he exclaimed:

"Now I'm gonna throw my rabbit's foot away and hit for home. It's all over now. He won't fight nobody for a year."

"Some people have all the luck," said Jeff.

"Well," said Coke, "sign me up with some other boys like Cahill and Larsen. Mike'll have to fight me some time."

"Yeah," said Regan. "Listen, boy, you ain't no wonder-man. Some night you're gonna take a high-dive and land on the canvas, and then it'll all be over."

"Hell," said Coke; "I've licked the best boys in my division. Who you figure can knock me out when I never been better in my life?"

"Well," said Regan, "how many guys figured you to beat Prince Pearl?"

"That's all right," said Coke; "but if you think I'm gonna sit around and wait for Mike Shay to come out of the hospital you got another think coming."

"All right, Coke," said Regan.

II

REGAN, who was just recovering from a three day jag, was feeling pretty low, so Jeff and Coke took him to a picture-show. On their way in the head-usher recog-

nized Coke and rushed over to him, offering his hand.

"Will you shake hands with me, Mr. Mason?" he said.

"Sure thing," said Coke, giving him a grip that made his hand tingle.

"I seen you fight Bat Cahill and I yelled so much I couldn't talk for two days."

"Yeah," said Coke; "it was a good go. Cahill's a sweet fighter."

The theatre manager came out of his office under the stairway, recognized Coke, and came over.

"How do you do, Mr. Mason," he said.

Coke shook hands with him.

"Howdy," he said.

"Did you buy a ticket to get in?" the manager inquired.

"Yeah," said Coke, jerking his thumb toward Regan and Jeff, who were standing a few yards away. "My manager and one of my sparring partners is right over there. Nice place you got here."

"Listen, Mr. Mason," said the manager, "don't you ever buy another ticket to get in here. Just tell the ticket-taker who you are. I'll arrange it for you. Bring a party if you want to. If the place is crowded, send the doorman into my office and we'll take care of you."

"Much oblige," said Coke; "that's sure mighty nice of you."

"Not at all. Not at all," said the manager.

"Well," said Regan, when Coke came over to them,

"you're getting as important as a big-time bootlegger. But, listen, Coke, don't be mitting everybody that way. Just grin at 'em or something, or tell 'em you got a bad hand. That right of yours ain't any too tough anyway."

"Give me your hand," said Coke.

"No," said Regan, pulling away; "don't try that strong arm stuff on me. Just listen to what I'm saying, or you'll ruin your mit."

"Sure," said Jeff. "You better do what the boss says, Coke. Once you get your hands on the bum and you're done."

"I guess you better get a keeper for me," said Coke.

"It's a good idea," said Regan.

"Anyway," said Coke, "I got free passes from now on for shaking hands."

"Ain't that good!" said Regan. "The more money you got, the less you have to spend."

The picture was on when the usher led them down the aisle. Regan wanted to sit in the back; Jeff wanted to sit in the middle, and Coke wanted to sit up front. Coke was the most obstinate of the three, so the usher seated them in the sixth row. Coke immediately fell into a daze; there were but two things, excluding women, that interested him: fighting and the movies. Jeff was capable of following only the simpler sort of movie, and as this one was full of plots and counterplots and dukes and revolutionists, he grew confused and began to fidget. Regan went to sleep with his head on Jeff's shoulder.

At the climax of the picture, when the heroine, a baby-faced blonde, was being attacked by the bad revolutionist, Coke turned to Jeff and said:

"Look at that dirty bum, Jeff. I wish I was there. If I wouldn't paste him one."

"What's his idea?" asked Jeff.

Coke didn't answer and sat tensely waiting for the inevitable last minute appearance of the hero, a democratic grand duke. At last the hero appeared, sent the bad revolutionist to the mat with a wild uppercut that a blind man could have dodged, took the heroine in his arms and dried her glycerine tears. Coke sighed and relaxed.

"That's a cute blonde," he said to Jeff; "but you ought to see my wife."

The lights came on, and a big orchestra in the pit began to play.

Regan woke up.

"Is the picture over?" he inquired.

"Yeah," said Jeff.

"Peach of a picture," said Coke.

"If you think so, I'm glad I missed it," said Regan.

"I didn't think it was so good," said Jeff. "I like comedies."

Regan sat up when the outer curtain rose, revealing a jazz-band surrounded by scenery. The band leader, a Jew with sleek hair, came out smiling and was greeted by loud applause.

"That boy's in a good racket," said Regan. "He gets mash notes by the ton."

"Yeah, the kike!" said Jeff.

"Yeah," said Coke; "he don't even play a horn or nothing. Just stands up there and waves a stick. I could do that."

"Sure," said Regan; "but you ain't got nice, pretty hair, and when you smile you look like a rhinoceros."

"There you go," said Coke.

The stage-show was good. There was a roughhouse comedian who made all three of them laugh and the chorus had a bunch of pretty legs and could dance. Regan cupped his hands and held them to his eyes.

"Coke," he said, "what about the third from the right? Suppose we could make a connection?"

"She's got black hair," said Coke. "I like blondes."

"That shows how dumb you are," said Regan.

"I ain't got no choice," said Jeff, laughing. "They all look good to me."

When the show was over Jeff and Regan went down into the Men's Room, and Coke stood in the lobby waiting for them. The manager came over to him, handed him a slip of paper, and said:

"Here's a year round pass, good for everyday except Saturday, Sunday, and Holidays. I thought I better fix you up right."

"Say," said Coke, "that's mighty nice of you. Thanks."

The manager smiled and went back into his office. Coke stood waiting for Regan and Jeff, watching the crowd. Someone called:

"There's Coke Mason!"

A lot of people stared. Coke shifted, flushed, and turned his back to the crowd. In the outer lobby some of the theatre employees were pulling down the signs and pictures, and putting up new ones. Coke, embarrassed, watched them. He read the signs then looked at the pictures. In one picture the hero and heroine, well-known screen-lovers, were being married and were surrounded by a group of extras. There was a blonde in the foreground that caught Coke's eye. It was Rose. Coke stood staring at the picture, stupefied, then, turning, he ran back into the inner lobby to hunt for Regan.

Jeff and Regan were coming up the stairs from the Men's Room.

"George," cried Coke, "I seen Rose. I seen her plain as day. She looks great."

He grabbed Regan by the arm and began to pull him toward the outer lobby.

"Say," said Regan, "calm yourself, you big sap. People'll think you're crazy."

"Is she outside?" asked Jeff.

"No, in a picture," cried Coke. "She's in the movies."

He guided them to the picture and pointed Rose out. Jeff stared at her, then turned to stare at Coke.

"Gee!" said Jeff; "she's a looker."

Coke stood staring at the picture.

"Come on," said Regan.

"Say," said Coke, "let's go west, George. I'd like to see her once and talk to her. She's off of me. I know that. But I'd just like to talk to her once."

"Go get a cab, Jeff," said Regan.

Jeff went out to get a cab. Coke stood staring at the picture of his wife. She was facing the camera, but not looking into it, her head was tilted up, and she was smiling.

"She makes that star look like a bum, George," said Coke. "I want to see her. George, can't we pack up and go west? We can get matches out there and I can kind of look around."

Regan stood looking at the picture for a long time, then he said:

"Listen, Coke, I got a better idea. We'll write to her in care of the company she's with. If she ain't off of you, you know what I mean, she'll answer your letter. If she don't want to see you no more, you'll never hear from her. No use chasing a woman that don't want you, see, Coke?"

Coke took hold of Regan's arm.

"Gonna help me, are you, George?"

"Sure," said Regan. "I'll help you. If you want to see her that bad, why, I'm for you."

"That's fine, George," said Coke. "Sure. You got the right dope. If she don't answer, why, I'll just forget about it, that's all."

"Sure," said Regan; "that's the talk. We won't take no chances, see? We'll put her name before she was married on the envelope and your name too."

"Yeah," said Coke. "I'd've never thought of that."

Jeff came in to tell them that he had a cab, and they went out. All the way to the hotel Coke sat star-

ing out the window at the traffic. Regan and Jeff said nothing. When they got out of the cab, Jeff said:

"You sure that was your wife, Coke?"

"Why, course I'm sure. Don't you think I know my own wife?"

"Boy," said Jeff, "she's sure a looker."

Jeff went to a gymnasium two squares away from their hotel to see if any of the pugs were still there, and Coke and Regan went up to Regan's room. Regan went to his writing-desk, got out some stationery, and said:

"There you are, Coke. Go to it."

"No," said Coke; "you write it. Nobody can read my writing and I can't spell good. Rose's hell on spelling and that stuff."

Regan sat down at the desk and Coke pulled up a chair beside him.

"Well," said Regan, "what do you want me to say?"

Coke leaned back in his chair and began to twist his forelock.

"Dear Rose," he said, "I seen your picture . . ."

" 'Saw,' " said Regan.

"Well," said Coke.

"Go on. Go on."

"Dear Rose," said Coke, "I saw your picture out in front of a movie house in New York and I just got to wondering whether you was all right or not. I hope you are as I would be worried something fierce if you wasn't as you know. I am getting along fine and if

I can ever get a match with Mike Shay I will be the next middleweight champion of the world as I told you I would be when you said I never would. Well, Rose, I would like to see you and talk over old times with you as I get lonesome. . . ." Coke hesitated and sat looking at the floor. "Say, George," he said, "maybe I better not say nothing about being lonesome in case she's off of me for good, see?"

"Good idea," said Regan.

"All right. Cut that out. Just say, 'I would like to see you and talk over old times with you. If you want to write to me and tell me how you are feeling bad or good you can write me at . . .' Put the address in, George, and then say, 'yours respectfully, William C. Mason.' "

"O.K.," said Regan.

Regan finished the letter, handed it to Coke, and began to address the envelope. Coke read the letter and said:

"That letter don't sound none too friendly to me."

"Friendly enough," said Regan. "If she writes to you then you can open up."

"That's right," said Coke.

"Have 'em send up a bell-boy and we'll mail this letter right away," said Regan.

Coke called for a bell-boy, then sat staring at the floor. Regan sealed the letter, and sat waiting.

"Say," said Coke, "much oblige for helping me out, George. I couldn't get along without you."

Regan looked slightly uncomfortable, rubbed his

chin and said nothing. When the bell-boy came in Regan handed him the letter and a tip, and said:

"Get a special on that and an air mail stamp and see that it gets out."

"Yes sir," said the bell-boy.

He went out. But Regan called to him and followed him out into the hall.

"Don't get no more liquor, George," called Coke.

Regan handed the bell-boy a dollar bill and took the letter from him.

"You mailed that letter, son," he said.

"Yes sir," said the bell-boy.

Regan slipped the letter into his pocket and went back into the room.

"Was you after him for liquor?" Coke demanded.

"Yeah," said Regan; "but he said he couldn't get me none till tomorrow. Trying to shake me down, but I wouldn't shake."

"Why don't you let up on the liquor, George," said Coke. "It'll beat you sure. A guy as smart as you ought to have better sense."

"That's my weakness," said Regan.

Coke sat looking at the floor.

"Coke," said Regan, "go hit the hay. It's late."

"All right," said Coke.

He got up, stretched, and aimed a few lefts at the air, then he went over and put his hand on Regan's shoulder.

"Goodnight, George," he said. "You're sure a good pal."

"Don't get sentimental," said Regan. "Beat it."

Coke went out. Regan sat for a long time looking at the wall, then he got up, took Coke's letter from his pocket, read it over a couple of times, then burned it and threw the ashes out the window.

III

Coke went three times to see the show his wife was in. She only appeared for a few minutes in one scene toward the end of the picture, but Coke sat through the whole performance, waiting for that moment. The third day the manager stopped him in the lobby and said:

"Mr. Mason, the head-usher tells me you've been here three times this half-week. You sure must be crazy about that picture."

"Well," said Coke, grinning, "my wife's in that picture, and you know I don't get to see her very much so I thought . . ."

He stopped and stood shifting.

"Has she got a part?" asked the manager.

"No," said Coke, flushing; "she's only an extra in this picture, but she tells me, I mean in her letters, see, that she's gonna get a good part pretty soon."

"That's fine," said the manager. "When she does I'll get the picture if I can and we'll get up a little story about it, eh?"

"Well," said Coke, flushing, "it won't be for some time yet, I guess."

"You just let me know," said the manager.

"Sure. I'll do that," said Coke.

When Coke got back to the hotel he went to Regan's room. Regan was playing poker with McNeil, Riley, Tim Morgan and a couple of Riley's friends. Regan was winning and giving everybody the laugh. Coke sat down to watch the game. Finally he whispered to Regan:

"You didn't hear nothing yet, did you, George?"

"Good Lord?" said Regan; "she ain't had time to write."

"Well," said Coke, getting up and looking over Regan's shoulder, "I thought maybe she might telegraph."

Regan turned and pushed Coke away.

"Don't look over my shoulder, you sap," he said. "Don't you know you'll break my luck?"

"Good boy," said Riley; "he won't hit any in-betweens now."

Coke watched the game for a while, then he sent down for a couple of papers, and lay on the bed, reading.

IV

Coke was sitting in a chair by the window, staring down into the street. Jeff, who had come in to talk with Regan about a match, addressed several remarks to Coke but got no answer. Jeff went over to Regan and whispered:

"What's the matter with Coke?"

"Don't pay no attention to him," said Regan; "he's just feeling low."

"Ain't he heard from his wife yet?"

"No," said Regan, raising his voice; "and he ain't likely to. I told him he'd never hear from her."

"Say," said Coke, getting up, "maybe she never got my letter. Maybe she ain't out in Hollywood no more."

"Oh," said Regan, "don't always be alibi-ing her. I'm getting sick of it."

Coke went back to his chair and sat looking out the window. Jeff and Regan sat talking about Jeff's semi-windup match with Kid Green. Jeff was a veteran and had at one time fought a lot of good men, but his hands had gone bad. Regan had got him the match with Kid Green, a good welter, trying to break into the middleweight division. Jeff lived in a state of perpetual excitement and couldn't think of anything else. Coke turned from his contemplation of the street, listening to Regan and Jeff for a few minutes, then got up and put on his hat.

"I'm gonna take a walk, George," he said. "I may go down to the gymnasium and I may not."

"Go to a show," said Regan.

"Want me to go along?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Coke.

He went out. Regan sat shaking his head.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do with that bird," he said. "Listen, Jeff, what makes guys such damn fools? I mean guys like Coke. He ain't exactly dumb;

he's been around. He's a good fighter and now he's got the money. But you think he gives a damn about his money and all the fun he can have?"

"Well," said Jeff, "he's crazy about that kid of his."

"Sure," said Regan; "but ain't there plenty of other women just as good looking? Better looking. I see fifty better looking than Coke's wife every day on the street. It's too deep for me. You know I sicked that blonde kid from Martin's Revue on him. And did she go for him! But it didn't do no good. He took her around and got a play, but it didn't take. Let me tell you something, Jeff, if I don't get that bird straightened out pretty soon he's gonna get walloped the next time he fights. When he's feeling low, he ain't got nothing in his legs. And when your legs don't work, you might just as well throw in the towel."

"Aw, he'll snap out of it as soon as the bell rings," said Jeff.

"Maybe," said Regan. "But that guy's in pretty bad shape. And the funny part of it is, he'd be in worse shape if he found his wife. That's the hell of it. She makes him jump through, see? Maybe that's what he likes; I don't know. But, Jeff, you're smart enough to see that no guy can be a champion with a darn fool wife hanging on to him and telling him when to breathe."

"Well," said Jeff, "I don't know."

"Yeah," said Regan; "I used to get a big kick out of the missus. She had about as much use for me as she had for a rattlesnake. She knew I was on to her.

Why, when Coke was fighting his most important fights —a semi-windup on a two-bit card was big stuff for him then, see?—why, she was out riding with one of her part-time boy-friends. I'm telling you straight, Jeff. She even tried to make me, and I'm no beauty as you can see by taking a good look. Yeah, she tried to make me and I wouldn't make. That cooked it. From then on I might just as well've been home when she was around."

"Good looking kid," said Jeff.

"Fair," said Regan.

"Well," said Jeff, "you can't tell nothing about what a guy'll do. I used to know a guy that got so nuts about a dame, he bumped himself off when she wouldn't play."

"Well," said Regan, "them kind of guys are better off dead."

"Yeah," said Jeff.

"You know, Jeff," Regan went on, "the funniest part about the whole thing is, Coke thinks she's as nice as pie. Even when she's trying to make a guy right in front of him, he don't tumble. It's too much for me. I've even spilled it to him, Jeff; told him the truth. What does he do? He says if I wasn't his pal, he'd sock me."

"It's too bad," said Jeff.

"Well," said Regan, "I got to do some tall figuring."

"He'll snap out of it," said Jeff.

Regan got up to get a cigar and while he was on his feet, the phone rang. It was Riley and he was so

drunk that he could hardly talk, but Regan finally caught what he was saying and began to dance. Jeff sat watching him.

"Hurray!" cried Regan, hanging up the receiver. "We're all set, Jeff. You heard me shout. We're all set. Mike Shay's been passed by the doctors and he wants to sign for a go with Coke."

"Yeah?" said Jeff.

"Oh, what a break," said Regan. "Sunday morning I'm going to early Mass."

"Is it straight?" asked Jeff.

"You bet it's straight. You never heard Urban Riley talk through his hat, did you? Not a chance. That mick's a wise bird. And get this, Jeff; he's gonna lay his roll on Coke."

"I'll lay some too," said Jeff.

Regan sat down at his writing-desk and began to write a letter.

"Jeff," he said, "go see if you can find Coke. Call up the gymnasium and if he ain't there, have him paged at the theatre."

"O.K.," said Jeff.

V

Coke came in grinning and put his arms around Regan.

"Well, George," he said, "I heard the good news."

"We finally landed, Coke," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke, "great stuff!"

"The newspapers did it," said Regan. "They kept razzing Mike till he got sick and tired of it. Newspapers are good for something after all, I guess."

"Sure," said Coke.

Coke sat down beside Regan, who was still working at his letter.

"What're you doing?" asked Coke.

"Writing to Mike's manager. Putting it in black and white, see? I'm gonna get my bid in quick. We might as well try to grab all we can. You know Mike."

"Well," said Coke, "get the match. That's all I care about."

Regan didn't say anything, but went on with his writing. For the next half hour Coke was kept busy answering the telephone and verifying the report that Mike Shay had actually decided to give him a match. Toward evening a couple of sport writers appeared and were asked to dinner by Regan. The hotel chef fixed them up a good meal and sent it up. Coke sat silent, while Regan discussed the fight with the newspaper men.

When they had gone, Regan said:

"Coke, there's something I want to take up with you now."

"All right," said Coke.

"It's like this," said Regan. "We're on big time now, we're gonna make a lot of dough, especially if you can lick Mike Shay, and from now on we got to do things business-like."

"Sure," said Coke.

"Well," said Regan, "you know, Coke, I been managing you for God knows how long and there ain't a scrap of paper between us, see? That's not business."

Coke looked at Regan in surprise.

"Ain't you satisfied, George?" he asked. "Don't I give you a fair shake?"

"Sure," said Regan; "but you're gonna be champion maybe, Coke, and we ought to have a contract or something. I even got Speed on a contract. We been pals, Coke, and all that, and I never felt like we ought to have a legal agreement or nothing like that. But we got to now. Hell, it don't look right."

"Well," said Coke; "it's all right with me. Fix up a contract and I'll sign it."

"That's the talk," said Regan.

He took a document out of his desk and handed it to Coke.

"Read that over, Coke, and see if it's O.K."

Coke took the document, turned it over and over, and finally began to read it, but the language was so complicated that he gave it up.

"Hell," he said, "I wouldn't read that thing for fifty bucks. If you say it's O.K., George, I'll sign it. But I don't get the idea."

"Just a legal agreement, that's all," said Regan. "Like all other managers have, see? It protects us both."

"Hell," said Coke, "ain't we pals?"

"Sure," said Regan. "But it's just good business, that's all. I don't mean we'd gyp each other if we didn't

have a contract or nothing like that, but it's just the right thing to do, see?"

Coke shrugged and picked up a pen.

"Well," he said, "it's all the same to me."

He signed his name, screwing up his mouth as he wrote, then he handed the contract back to Regan and got up.

"Fine," said Regan. "Now Coke, I got a nice place picked out for you where you can train. Out on Long Island. By the time you start to train the weather'll be nice, and you can do all the roadwork you want to."

"Sure," said Coke. "I want to take off about six pounds."

"All right," said Regan. "Mac's going with us, and Jeff'll be one of your sparring partners. But I got to pick up a good fast lightweight in place of Speed. No more of that stuff for Speed."

"No," said Coke; "Speed'll have to watch himself. He's a comer, and getting socked by a guy my weight ain't healthy for him."

"I got my eyes on an Irish kid," said Regan.

Coke didn't say anything and sat flexing his fingers and looking at the floor. Regan turned back to his desk and began to write another letter.

"George," Coke said finally, "I guess I ain't gonna hear from Rose."

"Looks that way," said Regan.

"Mighty funny," said Coke. "You'd think she'd write, anyway."

"Coke," said Regan, "don't you know that other people ain't like you? They get over things. You probably don't mean no more to her right now than I do."

"That's about it," said Coke.

Regan went on with his letter and Coke sat flexing his fingers and staring.

"You know," said Coke, "I guess I'm a pretty dumb guy. I should've knowed that a kid like her couldn't stay stuck on an ugly mutt like me. Yeah, sometimes I look in the mirror at my mug and I think to myself, 'how'd she ever put up with a mug like that?' "

"You ain't no beauty, that's a fact," said Regan.

"Well," said Coke, "I guess I may as well forget all about the missus and get me a regular girl."

Regan got to his feet and said:

"Listen, Coke, I'll make you a proposition. Come on in here."

Coke followed Regan into the bathroom. Regan took a quart of whiskey from the medicine-cabinet.

"See that?"

"Sure," said Coke.

"You know how well I like liquor," said Regan, "and you know what this quart of Canadian cost me. All right. Here's my proposition. You forget the missus and quit moping around and get down there to the training camp and work your tail off, and I'll quit the booze."

"You mean it?" exclaimed Coke.

Regan took the cork out of the bottle and poured the whiskey into the bathtub.

"All right, George," said Coke, "you're on."

They shook hands.

VI

Regan, Coke, Mike Shay and Mike's manager Little O'Donnell, were sitting at a table in Tim Morgan's office. The papers for the fight were all signed and a dozen or more flashlights had been taken. But the office was still crowded with newspaper men, big shot gamblers, amateurs and pugs.

Mike Shay was a nervous little man with dark auburn hair and freckles. His legs were slightly bowed and his shoulders bulky. His clothes were always too tight for him, and he walked like a sailor. He was thirty-four years old. From time to time he glanced at Coke and measured him.

"Well," said Little O'Donnell, "it's gonna be one of the fights of the century, and I'll bet any of you guys from the press that it'll outdraw any heavyweight match you name, barring a championship go."

"It ought to," said a reporter, "with the bums that's fighting in the elephant class."

"All the same," said Tim Morgan, "it's gonna be a big match, and anybody that comes to this fight'll see a fight. Shay and Mason are the two toughest guys in the business."

"Sure," said someone on the edge of the crowd; "they're matched so even it'll be a draw."

There was a laugh.

"That must be one of them fight experts," said the champion.

"Let's break it up," said Regan, getting to his feet.

"Just what I was thinking," said O'Donnell, also getting up.

Mike came over to Coke and awkwardly offered his hand.

"Glad I met you, Mason," he said.

"Thanks," said Coke. "Same to you."

"I still got a kink in my leg from that automobile accident," said Mike, "but it's working out."

"Glad to hear it," said Coke, slightly embarrassed. "I been having some trouble with my legs myself."

"The legs go first," said Mike.

"Yeah," said Coke.

Two reporters followed Regan and Coke out to Coke's car.

"Say, Mason," said one of them, "I got a bet on you already."

"Well," said Regan, "start spending it right away."

The reporter laughed.

"Some guy give me two to one."

"Take all you can get at that," said Regan, "and you'll get rich."

Regan got into the driver's seat and Coke climbed in beside him.

"Well," said Coke, "all we got to do now is wait till June."

"Wait, hell!" said Regan. "You got to train hard for this fight, Coke. Mike's a limit fighter. Never been knocked out in his life."

"Well, have I?"

"No," said Regan, "but Mike ain't got no iron jaw like you got. He's clever."

"He don't look clever to me. He just looks like a little gashouse mick."

"The Irish are the best fighters in the world," said Regan. "My mind'd be a lot easier if you had a little Irish blood."

VII

Coke was sluggish and generally in a bad humor. Even the sport writers noticed this and commented on it. Coke worked with effort, seemed to get no pleasure out of it, and when he wasn't working he spent his time lolling around staring into space. As a rule he sparred indifferently with Jeff Davis, sometimes taking them on the side of the head or flush on the mark without attempting to counter. Buddy Dugan, the little Chicago lightweight, would rip into him and get away without a scratch; and Ruby Hall, the big negro middleweight, who at first was scared of Coke began to think that in a fair go he could lick him.

But one afternoon Regan brought a headgear out and made Coke put it on. Coke had never worn a headgear in training before and thought it was effeminate. Regan didn't want him to go into the ring against

a slicker like Mike Shay with a cut over his eye, so he insisted that Coke put it on. Coke yielded and climbed through the ropes glaring. Ruby came out to meet him, grinning and shuffling, and immediately landed a left lead. But Coke stepped inside a right, sent a left hook to the body and banged Ruby on the side of the head with a right. Ruby was stunned.

"My God," said Ruby, "you got concrete in them gloves!"

After that he boxed cautiously and seldom led. Coke took it easy with Buddy Dugan, who circled around him, crouched, rushed in with rights and lefts and got away. But Coke was still surly, and when Jeff climbed through the ropes for the final rounds, he sailed into him and had him groggy at the end of two minutes.

Regan put his arm around Coke and led him into the dressing-room, where McNeil was waiting to give him a rub-down.

"You looked like a champion today," said Regan. "Keep it up. You scared that big shine stiff. He probably won't be no good to us from now on."

"I just pasted him a little," said Coke. "Some day I'll hit that shine with all I got and then watch."

"Well," said Regan, "all I want you to do is to keep going the way you are. You been soldiering on me, Coke. Don't you forget that I ain't touched a drop of liquor since we made our agreement."

"Well," said Coke, "a guy can't be his best every day. Sometimes I don't feel like doing nothing."

Coke got used to the headgear finally, and in a little

while he was as sluggish as before. Several of the sport writers confided to Regan that they thought Coke's legs were giving out. Regan told Coke. But Coke shrugged.

The same sport writers, friends of Regan, told him confidentially that Mike Shay was in wonderful shape, never looked better in his life, and was already talking about what he intended to do after he beat Coke. The newspapers carried accounts of Mike's difficulty in rounding into shape due to his automobile accident, but the sport writers told Regan that this was all front. Mike didn't want to be a big favorite to win as he was going to bet heavily on himself. Regan told Coke that Mike said that he would win by a knockout in three rounds.

"He'll lose by one," said Coke, but didn't seem especially interested.

Regan, though worried about Coke, played the match up and got a lot of publicity. Coke had saved somebody from drowning; or Coke had knocked out two sparring partners in three minutes; or Coke was going to travel in Europe after his victory over the champion; or Coke was contemplating putting on weight and getting into the heavyweight tournament; or Coke had had an offer from the movies; or Coke had been visited by a committee of prominent citizens of Cleveland, Ohio, who wanted him to open their new coliseum; or Coke had been invited to make a tour of the world in the yacht of a millionaire, not named.

This last stunt was to offset Mike Shay's popularity

with "Society." For some reason Mike Shay was backed by some of the so-called Four Hundred. They went to see him train, took him out to lunch, had their pictures taken with him, and made his training-camp a sort of social center. This was great publicity for Mike, and his manager, Little O'Donnell, made the most of it. Of course O'Donnell had some difficulty with his employees as they were not conversant with social usage and were apt to pick their noses in public and eat with their hats on. But Mike himself passed for "refined," principally because he hardly ever opened his mouth.

Coke's camp was quite the opposite. Bums from all over the world turned up there; ex-safe blowers, now prominent bootleggers, took rooms in a nearby hotel and scandalized the proprietor and his other guests. Gate-crashers, bunco men, small time and big shot gamblers, a noted gunman from Chicago, and a scattering of burlesque comedians of the old school could be seen sauntering through the village streets. "Society" was represented by the upper stratum of theatrical folk, who, though not in the Blue Book, were every bit as snobbish as the Park Avenue variety and deplored the atmosphere of Coke's training-camp. One movie actress got herself some free publicity by claiming that she had been insulted by one of Coke's henchmen. But the affair blew over.

Ten days before the fight, Tim Morgan ran an announcement in the paper that The Coliseum was nearly sold out. There was a scramble for tickets; a couple

of scalpers, working from the inside, made a big haul; some outlaw scalpers were arrested and fined; Tim Morgan made the front page with a paragraph, and in four days The Coliseum was actually sold out. Tim, relieved of all anxiety, now divided his time between the two training-camps, getting in the way, giving unnecessary advice, and having his picture taken with the two fighters, and, when he was lucky, with one or another of the Four Hundred.

But the sell-out didn't seem to interest Coke, who sparred listlessly and worked without interest. Regan tried dodge after dodge to no purpose. Coke remained listless and bored.

One day Speed De Angelo, who was nursing a sprained wrist, turned up and went into a conference with Regan behind closed doors. Coke got curious and went over to the gymnasium to talk with McNeil. McNeil and Jeff were sitting on the rubbing-table, talking.

"Say," said Coke, "what's Speed De Angelo doing here?"

"Talking business with the boss," said McNeil.

"Yeah," said Jeff. "Speed's climbing. If he wins his next two fights he's gonna get a shot at the championship."

"Yeah," said McNeil; "Willy Strapp's willing to give him a go if he can lick Red Stuart."

Coke sat swinging his feet.

"Coke," said McNeil, "you know what Regan said to me this morning?"

"About me?"

"Yeah. He said you was turning out to be just what Mike Shay said you was. A flop."

"He did, hunh?" demanded Coke, getting to his feet.

"Yeah," said McNeil; "and that ain't all. He said he was losing interest in you on account of the way you was training. He said he had a real boy now and he didn't care whether you won or lost."

"What do you mean, a real boy?"

"Why," said McNeil, "Speed De Angelo. He's had six straight knockouts."

Coke went out of the dressing-room without speaking.

"Maybe that'll bring him to," said McNeil.

Jeff shrugged and got up.

"He ain't half what he used to be," he said. "I never seen a guy go back so fast. His legs ain't no good."

"Good as they ever were," said McNeil. "It's in his head."

At four o'clock Regan came out of his office and began to hunt for Coke. But nobody knew where he was. Regan drove into the village and went to the hotel, but Coke hadn't been there. All the gamblers, begging for the latest news, tried to detain Regan, but he pushed them away and went out.

At five o'clock Jeff found Coke sitting alone on the beach, drawing pictures in the sand.

"Hello, Jeff," he said.

Jeff sat down beside him.

"What you hiding for, Coke," he inquired.

Coke shrugged and sat staring at the water.

"I just got sick of that camp and all the bums hanging around and everything. I'll be goddam glad when this fight's over."

"Hell," said Jeff, "I wish I was in your shoes, I wouldn't be crabbing. Fight your best and you'll be the next middleweight champion."

"Sure," said Coke. "But you know I get low when I'm training."

"So does a lot of guys," said Jeff. "That ain't nothing."

Coke sat there mussing up the sand.

"Well," said Jeff, "it's time for the dinner-gong. Let's get going."

"All right," said Coke.

Getting to his feet, he followed Jeff back to the training-camp. The dinner-gong had just rung and the men at the camp, including Regan and Speed, were already seated. Speed looked sleek and prosperous. He had on a double-breasted, blue serge coat, gray trousers and spats. His black hair was plastered with pomade, and he was flashing a diamond ring. Regan and Speed sat together and paid no attention to Coke when he came in. Coke stared at them, then walked through the dining-room into the kitchen. Lasses, the cook, grinned when he saw Coke.

"Hello there, champ," he said.

"Hello, Lasses," said Coke. "Say, put my grub over

here on the window-sill, will you? I think I'll eat out here."

"Sure," said Lasses; "but it's pretty hot up against that stove."

"That's all right," said Coke.

Lasses fixed his dinner, then began to fill the plates which Curly, the waiter, carried into the dining-room.

When Coke had finished his meal, he went out on the back-porch and sat on the steps. Far over the tree-tops he could see the ocean, dancing with light. He felt lonesome.

In about a half an hour Regan came out and sat down beside him.

"Why the lone-eagle stuff?" he inquired.

Coke turned and stared at Regan.

"Why," he said, "you guys was so damn busy you didn't see me come in. I didn't want to crowd you none."

"I thought you come in the back way," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke; "you were sure busy all right."

"Well," said Regan, "Speed and I have got a lot of stuff to talk over."

"Say," said Coke, "are you managing me, or ain't you?"

"I guess you're managing yourself," said Regan, getting up. "You're a pretty big guy now, I guess, and you ought to know your own business. But Speed wants my advice, see? He don't figure he can do the fighting and the managing at the same time."

Regan went in, slamming the door.

"George," called Coke, but Regan paid no attention.

VIII

Coke began to improve steadily. He not only went through his routine without a word of protest, but when he climbed into the ring for a round with Ruby Hall, or Dugan, or Jeff, he danced on his toes, couldn't get enough, and grinned all the time.

"He sure is a fighting man," said Ruby.

The sport writers noticed the change and wrote to their papers that Coke was in perfect condition for the fight, and that the odds of 8 to 5 with Mike Shay favored were paper odds and didn't mean a thing. Regan kept up his steady bombardment of the newspapers, and column after column were devoted to the doings of Coke Mason, contender. Mike Shay announced that he would win by a knockout, but very few believed him. The opinion of the majority of experts was that Mike Shay would shade Coke and retain his title. Seventy-five per cent of the wise money was bet that way. The hunch betters and the heart betters and the chronic short end betters were all on Coke. The only big shot gambler to bet a large amount on Coke was Urban Riley.

John Keen, the New York fight expert, wrote the following:

"The champion is an 8 to 5 favorite over the contender, and rightly. The champion is one of the clever-

est fighters in the business and while he is not a hard puncher and will probably not upset the rugged Mason, he will win the fight on points. Mason is a hard puncher and a real gong-to-gong fighter, but, while he has shown occasional flashes of boxing, his style is such that the champion will outpoint him handily. Barring accidents, Mike Shay will retain his championship."

Regan read Keen's summing up to Coke, who grinned.

"That's about right I guess," said Coke. "Barring accidents, Mike ought to win."

"Yeah," said Regan; "but I'm afraid that Mike's gonna accidentally run into a left hook."

"Wouldn't that be too bad?" said Coke.

PART IV

I

When Jeff, who was sitting on the porch, saw Regan get out of the automobile, he jumped to his feet, ran down the steps, and grabbed him by the arm.

"I been watching for you," he said.

Regan glanced at Jeff, who seemed excited.

"Now what?" he demanded.

"Why," said Jeff, "Coke's gone nuts. Nobody can do nothing with him. He just dances around and yells and grins fit to kill."

Regan looked puzzled.

"Well," he said.

"He got a letter," said Jeff.

"Goddam it," shouted Regan; "didn't I tell you and Mac never to give that guy any mail till I looked it over?"

"Yeah," said Jeff; "I know what you're driving at, George. And at first Mac thought maybe it was from his wife. But . . ."

"Where'd he get it?" Regan demanded. "I got the morning mail myself, and it ain't time for the afternoon mail."

"A newspaper guy give it to him. He told me it was sent to Coke care of his office."

Regan took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

"Well," he said, "who's it from?"

"I don't know," said Jeff. "He won't tell us nothing."

Regan nodded his head and laughed sarcastically.

"Ain't that a break!" he said. "You guys must be dumb as hell. That letter's from his wife sure as we're here. I thought he'd hear from her soon as he got up in the A-one class."

Regan sat down on the porch in a rocking-chair and mopped his forehead. Jeff sat on the steps and looked out across the water.

"Did you see the postmark?" asked Regan.

"No."

"Well," said Regan, "I hope to God she's in California."

Coke came out on the porch, pulling on his coat. He had just washed and shaved, and his face shone. He was wearing a high stiff collar, which was punishing him, and he had put water on his hair in an attempt to plaster it down, but it stuck up in the back like a rooster's comb.

Regan took one look at him, then turned away in disgust.

"George," cried Coke, "I heard from the missus. She's right here in town. She was sick, poor kid. She had the flu, and she's still laid up, but she's getting all right. You hear me! She's getting all right, good as ever. And she wants to see me, George; ain't that great? She ain't off of me at all. She's sorry cause she went away, and she says she's missed me all the time, only she was too proud to write me. That's the missus for you."

"Well," said Regan, "take your checkbook along."

"Aw, George," said Coke, "don't talk that way. Read this letter."

He offered the letter to Regan, but Regan pushed it away.

"Keep your private business to yourself," he said.

Coke stuffed the letter back into his pocket and started down the stairs.

"Wait a minute," said Regan. "Where you going?"

"Why," said Coke, "I'm going after the missus. She's down in some God-awful rooming house. I'm gonna put her up in some swell hotel."

"Listen," said Regan, "why don't you let me take care of that? And you stick around here and meet people."

"Not a chance," said Coke. "Anyway, the missus wouldn't like it, George. Not after she swallowed her pride that way. She'd think I wasn't acting right."

"Yeah?" said Regan. "Well, she ought to've thought about that before she packed up and left you."

"Aw, George," said Coke.

"Yeah," said Regan; "if it was some guys they'd tear the letter up and forget about it."

"Not me!" said Coke.

"Right on top of this fight too! I suppose now you'll want to sleep with her and knock your training to hell."

"No," said Coke, flushing.

"Well," said Regan, "if you're dead set on going, why, I'm going with you. We'll fix her up at some

downtown hotel, and leave her there. After the fight you do as you please."

Regan got up and Coke put his arm around him.

"All right, George," he said; "I'll do whatever you say. But you know, after getting that letter, I had to go see her, poor kid."

"Well," said Regan, "if it was me, she could go hang."

"Aw, George," said Coke, grinning; "don't talk that way. You're all steamed up over that fight, that's all. I'll do whatever you say, George. You boss the job, only I got to see the missus. Come on, let's go."

Regan turned to Jeff, who was sitting with his mouth slightly open.

"Jeff," he said, "tell McNeil to go right ahead with meals and everything. I don't know when we'll be back. And another thing, no leaks to this. If this gets out, I'll skin somebody alive. You tell White that I got a big story for him. A big human interest story for him, see? But if you give him any idea what it is, I'll shoot you personally."

"You gonna write the missus up!" cried Coke.

"Sure," said Regan; "it'll get you a lot of good publicity, and all the girls'll say, 'God, ain't he the sweetest thing!' You sap!"

Coke climbed into the driver's seat but Regan said:

"Slide over, boy. I'll do the driving. You think I want you to climb a pole two days before the fight?"

Coke obeyed.

II

WHEN Regan stopped at the address Coke's wife had given in her letter, Coke said:

"Boy, what a neighborhood!"

"Hell," said Regan, "this ain't so bad. Cheap boarding-houses. Don't try to kid me. You never seen the inside of a hotel till two years ago, and your missus used to live over a plumbing shop."

Coke laughed, jumped out of the car, ran up the steps and knocked at the door. Regan, muttering to himself, locked the car, climbed out wearily, and followed Coke. An old woman in a wrapper opened the door.

"I'm Coke Mason, the prizefighter," said Coke. "Is my wife here?"

The landlady smiled, very friendly, and nodded.

"Yes sir, Mr. Mason. I'll take you right up to her. We sure been hearing a lot about you, Mr. Mason."

"Yeah?" said Coke.

"Yes sir," said the landlady, leading the way up the stairs; "your little wife has been telling us all about you. How the two of you had an awful quarrel and busted up. Your wife's a mighty sweet little woman, Mr. Mason."

"You bet," said Coke.

Regan followed silently.

Rose's room was in the back of the house on the third floor. The halls were dark and dirty, and the windows hadn't been washed for years. The landlady

apologized for the looks of the place, saying she couldn't afford enough help and her rheumatism kept her from doing very much work.

"Uh hunh!" said Regan, in a bad humor.

The landlady knocked at Rose's door.

"Come in," said a voice.

Coke turned to Regan.

"That's the missus!"

He hastily took out his bill-fold and handed the landlady a dollar bill.

"Thank you, thank you," said the landlady. "The missus'll tell you about the rent."

"You can bet on that," said Regan.

The landlady pushed open the door and Coke went in. Rose was sitting in a chair by a dark court window. She was wearing a faded red kimono, and she had a blanket across her knees. Her face was thin and there was a sickly pallor under her heavy make-up. But her blonde hair was carefully waved and arranged, and her eyes were mascara-ed.

Coke turned, blinked, and stared at Regan, who said:

"Well, kid, here we are."

Rose looked at them without speaking, then her lips began to twitch, and, putting her hands over her face, she sobbed. Coke ran over to her, bent down, and put his arms around her.

"I been awful sick, Coke," she said. "I nearly died."

Coke just stood there with his arms around her.

Regan went out and shut the door behind him. The

landlady was still in the hall. She looked slightly embarrassed when Regan came out.

"Say, sister," said Regan, "how much does the kid in there owe?"

The landlady wrinkled her brow.

"She owes me four weeks rent," she said; "that's forty-eight dollars. And for meals I give her, poor kid. About ten dollars for meals."

"Twelve bucks a week for that room!" said Regan.

"Private bath," said the landlady. "I've got more."

"All right," said Regan.

He took out his billfold, counted out fifty-eight dollars, and handed it to the landlady.

"Give me a receipt in full," he said.

"Yes sir," said the landlady. "When you come downstairs I'll have your receipt ready."

"Listen," said Regan, "does the kid owe any more bills that you know about?"

"Well," said the landlady, "she owes a doctor a big bill, and the drugstore over on the corner has been dunning her for a couple of weeks. I don't know of nothing else."

Regan took out a card, wrote an address on it, and handed it to the landlady.

"If anybody comes around here looking for her tell 'em to get in touch with me and I'll pay the bills. I'm Mason's manager."

"Yes sir," said the landlady; "thank you, sir."

She started down the stairs and Regan knocked at Rose's door and went in.

Coke was sitting on a chair facing his wife. When Regan came in Coke turned his back to him and blew his nose. Rose had been crying and the mascara had made streaks on her face.

"Well, kid," said Regan, "been coming tough, eh?"

"Yeah," said Rose. "I was getting along all right, but I got the flu."

"Show business?"

"Yeah. In a chorus."

"Only think," said Coke, "she never got my letter."

"I wish I had," said Rose. "You'd sure have heard from me."

"The career stuff ain't paying dividends," said Regan.

"You haven't got a chance in Hollywood unless you're on the inside," said Rose. "Same as here, only worse."

"Coke's been batting 'em over," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Rose; "so I see by the papers. I wasn't going to bother Coke till after his fight, but I got so lonesome I didn't know what to do."

"Me, too," said Coke.

"I fixed up all the bills," said Regan.

"Much oblige, George," said Rose.

"Hell!" said Coke; "why didn't you leave that to me?"

"You got your hands full," said Regan.

Coke grinned, and, getting to his feet, he picked Rose up and sat down holding her on his lap.

"He ain't changed a bit," said Regan.

Rose put her arms around him.

"Still my sweet boy," she said.

"I bet you don't weigh a hundred pounds," said Coke.

"Well," said Rose, "you don't get fat on graham crackers and milk."

"You wait," said Coke; "I'll fatten you."

Regan got up and began to walk around. When his back was turned Rose kissed Coke.

"Honey, what did you want to run away for?" asked Coke.

"I was just a kid, Coke," said Rose. "I didn't know any better."

"Well," said Regan, "have you two screen-lovers made up your minds what you're gonna do yet?"

"Why, sure," said Coke. "I'm gonna take Rose down to the Touraine and get her a suite."

"Just a room," said Rose.

Regan rubbed his chin and stared at Rose.

"No sir," said Coke. "Coke Mason's wife is gonna have a suite. Hell, I got money. Let me spend it."

"No, big baby," said Rose. "A room's all I need. So that's settled."

Coke looked at Regan.

"You talk to her, George."

"Kid," said Regan, "if this guy wants to spend his money, let him spend it."

"No," said Rose.

"Well, what do you do in a case like that?" Regan asked Coke.

"The only thing is," said Coke, "I want her to be satisfied."

Rose laughed.

"Say," she said, "I been satisfied with a lot less for a long time. Yet let me do things my own way and it'll be all right."

"Good," said Regan. "Sounds to me like you've learned some sense."

"Well," said Rose, "I learned a lot of things I never knew before."

"Good," said Regan. "Now you two birds untangle for a minute and listen to me, because I'm running the show till the fight's over. We'll fix you up at the Touraine, kid, and see that you get everything you want. I'll get Coke's doctor to come down and give you the once over and see what you'd better do till you get on your feet again. We'll get you a maid and fix things so you can buy the clothes you need. . . ."

"Don't I need them though," said Rose, smiling.

"Well, you don't buy no ermine on forty a week," said Regan.

"Thirty-five," said Rose.

"All right," said Regan. "But get this. Take a good look at your sweet boy because you ain't gonna see him no more till the doctor brings him to, after Mike Shay gets through pasting him."

Rose laughed and patted Coke's face.

"He'll never whip my boy," she said.

"You tell 'em," said Coke.

Regan turned his back and lit a cigar. Rose took Coke's face between her hands and kissed him repeatedly.

"Wait a minute," said Regan, turning. "You're putting bad ideas in that boy's head. I'll have to lock him up at night."

"Oh, no," said Rose. "I'm not feeling any too frisky."

Regan laughed loudly and hit Coke on the back.

"Well," said Regan, "do you feel strong enough to get your stuff packed up and go down town with us?"

"Do I!" exclaimed Rose, getting up. "I'd leave this place if I had to crawl."

"Don't blame you," said Coke.

"Well," said Regan, "I've lived in worse."

"So have I," said Coke; "but not lately."

"Coke," said Rose, "go over in the closet and get my bags."

"I'll tell you," said Coke. "Just leave all this stuff here. Bags and all. We'll get all new. Just put on a dress and take a toothbrush."

"All right," said Rose. "That's a notion. I can't get used to the idea that I got money. I'll give the landlady all my stuff."

"And snap it up," said Regan. "I want to get this bum back for a light workout before I put him to bed. Tomorrow he rests."

"First," said Rose, "I want a decent meal."

III

REGAN lay back in his chair and lit a cigar. McNeil sat on the table, whittling, and Jeff was looking at the pictures in the Police Gazette. In an adjoining bedroom, Coke was snoring.

"Well," said Regan, "Mac, you know I don't talk wild, but, listen, tomorrow night you're gonna be the trainer of a world champion."

"Maybe," said McNeil.

"No maybe about it," said Jeff. "I never seen Coke in better shape."

"You said it," said Regan. "And tomorrow night he can fight his own way. I ain't gonna tell him a thing. He'll left hook that Irishman to death."

"Only thing I'm afraid of," said McNeil, "is that Mike'll be smart enough to keep away from him. He's the smartest fighter in the business. I've watched him fight twenty fights. He changes his pace, and that's tough to begin with. He fights slow the beginning of one round and speeds up at the end; then, the next round, he comes out of his corner a-boiling and slows down toward the end. He runs his fights to suit himself. He ain't been extended for over a year."

"Well," said Regan, "he didn't look very good against Joe Savella."

"Just what I been telling you," said McNeil. "He fought Joe to suit himself. He stalled through most of the fight and speeded up the last three rounds. All he wanted was a decision."

"That's all he wants tomorrow," said Regan, laughing. "Can you picture Mike Shay knocking Coke out?"

"No," said McNeil, "Coke's the toughest boy fighting. But don't forget that Larsen knocked him down."

"Yeah," said Regan, "but he bounced up and the Swede thought the roof fell on him."

"All right," said McNeil. "I got a little money on Coke, and I'm for him. But I don't want you guys to get disappointed. I've seen too many near champions get decisioned by Mike Shay."

Outside it began to blow; they could hear the waves on the beach; and in a little while it was raining, a steady, monotonous drumming on the roof.

"Tim Morgan's luck," laughed Regan. "Some of the newspaper guys couldn't find nothing else to kick about, so they started razzing Tim for holding an indoor show in June. There's the answer," he concluded, indicating the rain by a jerk of his thumb.

"Yeah," said Jeff; "cats and dogs."

"That reminds me," said Regan. "Speaking about newspapers, wait till you read the story about Coke and his missus that I gave White exclusive. It's a dandy."

"How about the missus, anyway?" McNeil inquired.

"Well," said Regan, "she's been a pretty sick girl and she's kind of tame right now. She acts like she's learned some sense. But you never know."

"She's a bear for looks," said Jeff. "I wish I had a wife like that."

McNeil and Regan laughed. Coke put his head in

the door. His hair was standing on end and his face was swollen with sleep.

"Say," he said, "it's raining."

"Well, what of it?" Regan demanded.

"Nothing. How long have I been asleep?"

"About three hours."

Coke stood scratching his head.

"Say," he said, "I think I'll call up my wife. It's only about one o'clock, ain't it?"

"You go back to bed, Coke," said Regan. "The doctor said he wanted the missus to get a lot of sleep."

"Oh, yeah," said Coke; "I forgot."

Coke shut the door, then he opened it.

"George," he called, "I'm hungry. Can't you get Lasses to cook me something?"

"How about soup?" asked Regan. "We got some left. Mac'll get it for you."

"All right," said Coke.

Coke went back and put on a sweater and a bathrobe, then he came out to sit with them. Mac and Jeff went out to the kitchen to get Coke's soup.

"How you feeling, Coke?" asked Regan.

"A-one," said Coke. "I feel like a champion."

"That's just what you're gonna be."

"George," said Coke, "I want to thank you for being so nice to the missus when you don't like her. You're a good pal, George."

"Never mind," said Regan.

There was a screech of brakes on the lawn outside.

"Who the hell you suppose that is?" Coke demanded. "Maybe it's the missus."

He got to his feet. Someone knocked at the door and Regan went over to open it. Riley came in followed by Ben Mandl and Bat Cahill, the middleweight.

"Hello, Coke," said Riley. "What you doing up this hour of night?"

"I got hungry," said Coke. "I woke up hungry."

"What do you guys want?" asked Regan.

They all sat down at the table.

"Well," said Mandl, "we're all betting on your boy and we came out for a chin."

"You betting on Coke, Mandl?" asked Regan.

"Yeah," said Mandl, flourishing a cigar to display his big diamond ring; "I switched."

"Me, too," said Cahill, grinning at Coke.

McNeil and Jeff came in with Coke's soup and set it down on the table. Coke began to eat, paying no attention to the others.

"Well," said Regan, "what did you want to come out here at this time of night for?"

"We heard a rumor," said Mandl.

"I don't know what you mean," said Regan; "but get this: Coke's fighting on the square like he's always fought, and if Mike Shay wins it'll be because Coke ain't good enough to whip him."

"That's all right," said Mandl; "but how about his hands?"

Coke looked up.

"Whose hands?" he demanded.

"Your hands all right?" Riley inquired.

Coke held his hands up and smacked them together; then he doubled up his fists and said:

"Anybody want to see how good they are?"

Cahill came over and examined them, then he began to laugh.

"Can you beat it!" he said.

Mandl and Riley burst out laughing.

"Oh, what a break," said Mandl.

"Say," said Regan, "what's the idea of the vaudeville act? If you guys got any cracks to make, make 'em!"

"Well," said Riley, "the report's out that Coke busted one of his hands, but that he ain't gonna say nothing about it, but just favor it as much as he can on account of the money that's up."

"Which hand?" asked Regan, quickly.

"His right," said Mandl.

Regan turned to Coke.

"Things are sure coming our way," he said.

"Yeah," said Mandl, "some of the guys betting on Coke are panicky and have started hedging. Mike's two to one downtown."

Regan took out his checkbook, wrote a check and handed it to Riley.

"Bet all of that, Urban," he said.

"Sure," said Riley.

"Half of that's mine," said Coke.

"All right," said Regan.

"George," said Riley, "I'll cash this check for you and bet the money. We don't want a check this size with your name on it floating in."

"All right," said Regan.

Cahill got up and was followed by Riley and Mandl.

"We'll be going," said Cahill. "Much oblige for giving us the dope."

"Sure," said Regan, "but don't let it go no farther."

"Don't worry," said Mandl.

They went out. Regan turned to McNeil, who was smiling.

"Well, Mac," he said, "what do you think?"

"I think Coke's in."

Coke finished his soup and got up.

"Favor that right tomorrow night, Coke," said Regan, "and you'll have an ace in the hole."

"I got you," said Coke.

Coke went back to his bed and in a few minutes they heard him snoring.

IV

When Coke entered The Coliseum from the aisle near his dressing-room the crowd got to its feet and roared. The champion came in at the same time, in order, Regan said, to get in on the ovation. They climbed through the ropes together. The ring swarmed with officials, newspaper men, and cameramen.

"Looks like a convention," said Mike, smiling.

"Yeah," said Coke.

After the pictures had been taken, the fighters interviewed, and the announcements made, Leo Harness, the referee, climbed through the ropes, superintended the tying on of the gloves, then went into a neutral corner for a conference with the judges. Bud Shay, Mike's brother, and one of his seconds, said to Coke:

"Nice turn out, Mason."

"Yeah," said Coke.

When Coke went to his corner, McNeil said:

"Kind of hobnobbing with the opposition, ain't you?"

"Well," said Coke, "they're just friendly, that's all."

"Yeah," said McNeil, "too damn friendly. That's just some of Mike's bunk. He wants you to enter the ring feeling nice and friendly and brotherly so he can give you a good socking."

"I don't fight that way," said Coke.

"Well," said McNeil, "I'm just telling you."

Coke turned to Jeff.

"They tell me you got decisioned, Jeff."

"Yeah," said Jeff. "I fought that O'Keefe kid I got a draw with in Chi. He ain't so much, Coke, but he's hardboiled and he's got a funny stance. It bothered me. I'm gonna get a return with him."

"The boss is gonna get the kid on a contract," said McNeil.

"O'Keefe?" Coke demanded.

"Yeah," said McNeil, "he's managing himself. Can you beat it?"

Coke laughed.

"What's wrong with George?"

"Oh," said Jeff, "the kid'll come in handy. He'll lick a mess of second raters. It'd take a pretty good boy to lick him in six rounds. You can't dope him out. I'd've decisioned him if the fight had gone four more rounds."

"Don't you worry about George," said McNeil to Coke. "He always knows what he's doing."

"It's all right with me," said Coke. "He can sign up fifty palookas if he wants to."

The referee called the fighters to the center of the ring for instructions. When he had finished, he ordered the ring cleared.

"Well," said Mike, smiling, "here we go."

"Yeah," said Coke.

Coke went to his corner. Regan put his head through the ropes and took Coke by the arm.

"Favor that right, kid," he said.

Coke nodded.

The bell rang. Coke shuffled into the center of the ring, carrying his right low. Mike circled around him, trying to draw him. Coke led with his left, missed and took a series of light body punches. He clinched. The referee broke them, and Mike stepped back slowly, feinted, then rushed Coke, beating him about the body. Coke landed a light left and clinched. Mike repeated his former tactics, landing three blows to Coke's one. Mike's blows were light and Coke hardly felt them, but Mike was taking no chances and was piling up points. Coke, hampered by favoring his right, fought awkwardly, and frequently clinched. The crowd didn't

like it, and shouted for Mike to straighten him up. Before the first round was over, the crowd was for Mike. But Coke grinned. When the bell rang Coke shuffled to his corner.

"It's O.K.," said McNeil. "I seen him watching your right."

"Yeah," said Coke, "but I can't keep it up. I can't seem to hit hard with my left when I'm stalling with my right."

"All right," said McNeil. "Don't talk."

In the middle of the second round Mike landed a vicious left to Coke's mouth, drawing blood, and Coke, forgetting himself, swung with his right, hitting Mike on the shoulder. The punch was a hard one and Mike was momentarily thrown off balance.

"Better watch that mit," said Mike, smiling.

Coke said nothing, but fell into a clinch. The referee separated them. Mike backed toward the ropes on his toes, watching for an opening. Coke led with his left and Mike bounded off the ropes, landing a hard left to the body, followed by a right to the head. Coke fell into a clinch and the crowd booed. When the bell rang, Coke shuffled to his corner shaking his head.

"Bring on the Iron Man," somebody shouted.

Pieces of newspaper began to sail down from the gallery. Mike sat in his corner, nodding, while his brother talked to him.

The radio-man, a fight expert, was telling his audience that it looked very much as if the Ohio Iron Man was going to get a good lacing.

Mandl, who was sitting with Riley and Regan, said:

"Well, that's two rounds for Mike."

"That ain't nothing," said Riley. "When he fought Prince Pearl he lost the first five rounds."

Coke wasn't even winded and sat leaning on the ropes with his legs crossed.

"He can't hit worth a damn," said Coke. "I can't even feel that left."

"No," said McNeil, "and he's getting careless."

Coke grinned.

The third, fourth and fifth rounds were duplicates of the first two, except that round five was faster and more even. Coke wasn't landing heavily, as Mike was going with the punches, but he was landing, in spite of stalling with his right, and at the end of the fifth Mike looked worried. The crowd was quiet, and even a flurry of infighting in the middle of the fifth round failed to rouse them. They had come to see Mason, the heavy puncher, upset Mike, whom they had never seen on the canvas. As far as the crowd was concerned, this was just another Mike Shay circus; another waltz-me-around-again bout with Mike Shay getting the decision at the end of the fight. When the bell rang for the sixth round, somebody yelled:

"Well, go into your dance!"

There was a prolonged jeering.

The radio-man informed his listeners that the crowd was kidding the fighters and that this was probably the worst championship fight he had ever seen.

"Mason," he said, "lumbers around like a brewery

horse and doesn't seem to know that he's got a right hand. Little Mike is landing repeatedly but Mason doesn't even know he's been hit. If Mason could fight like he can take them, he'd be in a class by himself. Wait a minute," cried the radio-man, interrupting himself; "they are actually fighting, friends, actually fighting. Just now Coke Mason nearly fell on top of me. He stepped on one of his own feet and tripped himself."

Mike, who was no longer smiling, took advantage of Coke's accident, which was due to faulty footwork, and kept him on the ropes beating him about the body. Coke covered up and took them on the biceps. The crowd cheered. Mike kept peppering Coke, who remained covered up.

"Peek-a-boo!" yelled somebody.

Mike was giving Coke a bad beating and Coke was really in trouble. He tried to maneuver himself out of the corner, but Mike rushed him, beating him with both hands.

"My God," groaned Mandl, "he's got him licked. Smart boy, that Irishman."

Suddenly Coke straightened up, took a left hook flush on the jaw, and a right on the side of the head, and swung his right which landed squarely on Mike's ribs and sent him spinning. The crowd got to its feet and roared. Mason was living up to expectations. Mike, with a surprised look on his face, back-pedaled, but Coke was on top of him with both hands. Mike fought gamely, throwing his punches faster than Prince Pearl

had thrown them. But Coke took them and came in for more. Feinting with his right, he shot his left to Mike's midsection and Mike went down. The bell rang. Mike sprang to his feet and danced to his corner, but he was hurt.

"I had to do it," Coke said to McNeil. "I was in a tight place."

"Shut up," said McNeil, working over him. "You'll need your breath before this fight's over. Listen, now, don't think you got Mike licked cause you floored him. He's a shifty boy, and you've got to watch your step."

"Well," the radio-man was saying, "this Mason boy's as tough as they make them, but you've got to get him sore before he'll fight. He worked himself out of a bad place, took all Mike Shay had, and floored the champion for the first time in his career."

When the bell rang for round number seven, part of the crowd got to its feet and yelled. Coke bounded into the ring, his chin on his chest, crouching, bobbing and weaving, his left low and his right cocked. Mike, who looked determined, met him and they swapped punches, but the going got too rough for Mike. He clinched. The referee separated them.

"Stalling bastard!" said Mike.

But Coke paid no attention and rushed Mike, landing on his shoulders and biceps but unable to penetrate his defense. Mike danced away, circled around Coke and made him lead and miss, then landed a hard left to the head. Coke rushed him again, carried

him to the ropes, and Mike clinched. The referee separated them, and Mike danced away, sidestepped a rush, and landed a light left and then a right swing full on the point of the jaw. Coke's legs wavered. The crowd roared for a knockout. Mike was on top of Coke, hitting him at will. Coke fell into the ropes and slid to the floor. Hats sailed through the air and men in the ringside section climbed on their chairs to get a better view of the fallen fighter. But at "nine" Coke got to his feet, met Mike in the center of the ring and traded punches with him. Again the going got too rough for Mike and he clinched, but Coke got a hand free and clubbed him. The referee pulled them apart. Mike circled Coke, looking for an opportunity for a right swing, but Coke crossed him by suddenly straightening up out of his crouch and rushing Mike. Mike swayed away from a right swing, but got a left hook in the short ribs. He was hurt and back-pedaled, Coke shuffling after him. The bell rang.

"Boy, what a fight," said the radio-man.

"Take it easy now," said McNeil, working over Coke. "I think you got him, Coke. Land that left hook square at the beginning of the next round and you got him."

Mandl tapped Regan on the arm.

"I thought you said Mike Shay couldn't hit."

"Why," said Regan, "he caught Coke on the button. Any other guy'd be laying there yet."

When the bell rang for the eighth round, Mike leapt

into the ring, caught Coke slightly off balance and punished him about the body.

"I got you measured," said Mike.

Coke said nothing, and backed away, but Mike was on top of him again, so Coke clinched. There was a continuous roar from the crowd, who sensed the fact that the fight could not last at the pace it was going. Mike was giving Coke a bad beating, and Coke seemed unable to evade the body blows that threw him off balance and put him on the defensive. But the fight ended abruptly at the very moment the crowd was certain that Coke was licked. Mike, in getting away, missed his footing and got off balance for a second. Coke leapt in, sent a left hook to the body and followed up with a solid right to the jaw, the hardest blow of the fight. Mike went down. Coke, whose hair was bristling, was dragged to a neutral corner. At the count of nine Mike struggled to his feet, but stood weaving with his hands at his side. Coke glanced at the referee. Bud Shay threw in a towel.

In a moment the ring was full. Coke was dragged through the crowd to his corner.

"Well," said McNeil, "how do you feel, champ?"

Coke grinned.

"That boy's tough," he said.

The crowd parted violently and Mike Shay, dragging his brother after him, confronted Coke.

"You got to give me a return, Mason," he cried. "I can lick you any day in the week."

Coke got to his feet, uncertainly. A crowd surrounded them.

"Well," said Coke, "you got to see my manager about that."

"Hell," said Mike, "don't try to stall like you did all through the fight."

"What's the use of getting sore, Mike," said Coke. "I ain't fighting nobody for a while yet."

"Yellow!" said Mike, and turning on his heel he disappeared into the crowd.

"Yellow, am I!" cried Coke, leaping after Mike.

But McNeil, Jeff and Regan grabbed him.

"Don't pay no attention to that Irishman," said Regan. "He always was a sore head."

The radio-man took Coke by the arm as he climbed through the ropes.

"Say something, will you, champ?"

Coke stepped to the microphone.

"Hello, folks," he said. "It was a tough go and I'm glad it's over. Good night."

On the way to the dressing-room Coke was surrounded by a crowd of men, who insisted on shaking hands with him. Regan was as diplomatic as possible, but he knew how tired Coke was and hurried him along. Aided by McNeil and Speed De Angelo, he squeezed Coke through the crowd and into the dressing-room. He put Jeff on guard at the door.

"Say," said Coke, lying down wearily, "if anybody ever tells you Mike Shay can't hit, you tell him to

put his jaw out once." Then he sat up suddenly. "Did anybody telephone the missus?"

"Lay down," said Regan. "She's got a radio, ain't she?"

"Sure," said Coke; "I forgot."

He lay quiet while McNeil looked him over.

"Funny for Mike to act like he did," said Speed. "What did he want to make a show of himself for?"

"His head was buzzing from that right," said Regan.

"If I was Coke," said Speed, "I wouldn't give him no return till I got good and ready."

"Don't worry," said Regan.

They sat silent, and watched McNeil work on Coke. There was a hubbub in the corridor and they could hear Jeff talking to the crowd. Finally Coke said:

"Well, boys, I'm champion."

"How does it feel?" asked Speed.

"I can't notice nothing different," said Coke; "except I got a nice headache."

V

"I'LL go up as far as the door with you," said Regan. "Then I'm leaving."

They got into the elevator.

"You're gonna say hello to the missus, ain't you?" asked Coke.

"Well," said Regan, "I'll say hello, but that's all. I got a date with Riley and Mandl. I'm gonna break training."

"You better lay off that stuff, George," said Coke. "You been looking a lot better since you quit it. Why don't you lay off?"

"Say, pastor," said Regan, "why don't you speak from the pulpit?"

"All right," said Coke; "but liquor don't do you no good, George. It don't hurt some people, but it's poison to you."

The elevator-boy had been staring at Coke and missed their floor.

"I said five, buddy," said Coke.

"Yes sir," said the elevator-boy. "I heard part of the fight over the radio, Mr. Mason. We thought you was licked."

"I thought so myself," said Coke, laughing.

He took a dollar bill out of his pocket and when the elevator-boy opened the door for them, he gave it to him.

"Thank you, Mr. Mason," said the elevator-boy. "We was all pulling for you."

They left the elevator and Coke, motioning for Regan to be quiet, tiptoed to the door of Rose's room and turned the knob. But the door was locked. He knocked. A man opened the door. Regan stared at Coke. The man smiled.

"I suppose you're Mr. Mason," he said. "My wife and I were keeping your wife company."

"Oh," said Coke, "glad to hear it. What's the name?"

"Lewis," said the man. "Paul Lewis."

He took out a card and handed it to Coke, who gave it to Regan, and hurried into the room. Rose was sitting in a big chair with her feet on an ottoman. She was wearing a black silk kimono, trimmed with gold. Her hair was marcelled and her face was carefully made up. Mrs. Lewis, a big woman with black hair, was sitting across from her. Coke went over to Rose, put his arms around her and kissed her.

"Well," he said, "I'm champion."

"We heard it over the radio," said Rose. "I got so nervous when he had you on the floor that Mr. Lewis turned it off, but I made him turn it on again."

"Yeah," said Coke. "He hit me so hard I bounced off the ropes. But you should've seen me flatten him in the eighth. He got sore and made a row after the fight. But what's the use?"

"This is Mrs. Lewis, Coke," said Rose. "I used to know her out in Hollywood. Her husband used to manage Willy Strapp."

"Pleased to meet you," said Coke.

"Thank you, Mr. Mason," said Mrs. Lewis. "I was just telling your wife that the game got too rough for Paul. He gave it up. He's in the theatrical business now."

"Yeah," said Coke; "the game's pretty rough, but I like it."

"Coke's making a lot of money at it," said Rose.

"Well," said Mrs. Lewis, "as long as you're making money at it, it's all right. Anything is."

"But I like it, anyway," said Coke. "I liked it when

I was getting fifty dollars a bout. Remember, Rose, when we was living over the grocery store?"

Rose didn't answer him, and turned to shake hands with Regan, who had been talking with Lewis.

"Hello, George," said Rose. "They tell me you're managing a champion now."

"That's right," said Regan. "How you feeling?"

"I'm still weak."

"Coke," said Regan, "Lewis here used to manage Willy Strapp before he was champion."

"Yes," said Lewis, "but I didn't like the game. Too crooked."

"Yeah," said Regan, "it's pretty crooked and getting worse, but we always been on the square."

"Sure," said Coke. "I wouldn't fight in no crooked fights."

He sat watching Lewis, who was his idea of a goodlooking man. Lewis was tall and slim, about forty years old, and very carefully dressed. His hair was black and lustrous, and he wore it rather long. His nose was straight and well-cut, and his eyes were blue with heavy lashes like a woman's. His hands were long and slim, the nails well-manicured, and he was wearing three rings, one of which was a big diamond mounted in a circlet of rubies. He had a long amber cigarette holder and he wore spats.

"That's the way to talk," said Lewis. "If there were more fighters like you the game would be a real game."

Lewis smiled blandly at Coke, who was flattered.

"There's more than you think," said Regan. "It ain't the fighters that make the game crooked, it's the hangers-on, the gamblers. Over half of the boys that go into the game, go in because they like it. Coke would rather fight than eat and he ain't the only one. But fighters are human same as any body else, and when fixers begin to talk in four figures, well, use your imagination. To hear some people talk you'd think everything was straight but the fight game. Bunk!"

"Maybe you're right," said Lewis, smiling. "I guess I happened to run into a lot of crookedness all at once, and got a wrong slant."

"Sure," said Coke.

"Well," said Mrs. Lewis, "personally I don't like the fight game, and never will. I never had a peaceful moment while Paul was in it."

"Now, Louise!" said Lewis, frowning at her.

Mrs. Lewis looked very uncomfortable and tried to smile. Regan got up.

"Well," he said, "I'll be traveling. I got a heavy date with a couple of big shots. Coke, if I was you, I'd get to bed and get some sleep. How do you feel?"

Coke grinned.

"Tired," he said.

"It's no wonder," said Regan, "the socking you took. You should've seen him, Rose. Mike hit him with everything but the water-bucket."

"Yeah," said Coke, "but it didn't do him no good."

"Don't get up, none of you," said Regan, waving Coke and Lewis back into their chairs. "If that story's

out yet, Coke, I'll send you up a paper. So long, everybody."

"Goodbye, George," said Rose. "Much oblige for taking such good care of the child here."

"Goodnight, Mr. Regan," said Lewis. "You've got my card. Look me up some time."

Regan went out.

"Well," said Lewis, "so that's your manager."

"Yeah," said Rose. "George and Coke've been friends for years. They was born right across the street from each other, only George is five years older."

"He looks older than that," said Lewis. "Mason here looks like a college boy. By the way, how old are you, Mason?"

"I'll be twenty-nine next September," said Coke.

"You don't look it," said Lewis. "And your wife here must be much younger."

"No," said Coke, "she . . ."

"I'm a couple of years younger," said Rose hurriedly.

"That would make you about twenty-six," said Lewis, smiling; "but you don't look it."

"Why, Paul," said Mrs. Lewis, "I think she does. She looks about the same age as Ada. Ada," she explained, "is in Paul's new roof show. She's a dear. She must be at least twenty-six."

"Oh, you're in the show business," said Coke.

"Well," said Lewis, "not very heavily. I train

Martin's choruses for him. I'm getting a roof show ready for him now. We open in July."

"Well!" said Coke.

"You haven't got a front row job for me, have you?" asked Rose, laughing.

"Might be such a thing," said Lewis.

Coke looked from one to the other.

"Are you two kidding?"

Lewis glanced at Rose and said:

"Certainly."

"Well," said Coke, "I thought you was. Because Rose is out of that business. She's gonna have it soft from now on. She's had it tough and she's been sick. None of that for her. I got money and she don't never have to worry again."

"Lucky girl," said Mrs. Lewis.

"We was joking, Coke," said Rose.

"Sure," said Coke.

Someone knocked at the door. Coke started to get up, but Lewis waved him back.

"I'll go, Mason," he said. "You're tired."

Lewis opened the door and a bell-boy gave him a newspaper. He took the newspaper with a flourish and handed the boy a dollar bill.

"Mr. Regan sent that up to Mr. Mason," said the bell-boy.

Lewis closed the door and handed the paper to Coke. On the front page there were three fight pictures; one of Mike and Coke shaking hands, one of

Mike on the floor in the eighth, and one of Coke after the fight. The round by round account of the fight was headed:

MIKE SHAY FIGHTS BEST FIGHT OF CAREER AND IS DEFEATED

Coke turned to page two. There was an article topped by a young picture of Rose, headed:

MASON AND WIFE STAGE RECONCILIATION

"Here you are, honey," said Coke. "Here's a surprise for you."

He gave Rose the paper and looked over her shoulder. Lewis and his wife exchanged a glance, then they went to look at the picture.

"It's me!" cried Rose, hurriedly reading the article.

"Yeah," said Coke. "Ain't that a nice surprise? George done it."

"Oh, that's wonderful," said Rose.

"Is that an old picture?" Mrs. Lewis inquired.

"Yeah," said Coke; "that's the one I always carry in my pocket."

"It's not so very old," said Rose.

"Well," said Lewis, "all I can say is, that's wonderful publicity if you ever think about going back in the show business."

Coke turned and stared at Lewis.

"Say, Mr. Lewis," he said, "my wife don't have to go back in no show business. If I never fight another fight I got money enough to get by on."

" 'Tisn't always a question of money," said Lewis.

"No, of course not," said Rose. "But I wouldn't do it if Coke didn't want me to."

"That's the talk, honey," said Coke, putting his arm around Rose.

"Paul," said Mrs. Lewis, "don't you think we better be going."

"Why, yes," said Lewis, "come to think of it."

"Don't rush off," said Rose.

But Coke said nothing.

"I think we'll be going," said Lewis. "I bet you two have got a lot to talk about."

"We sure have," said Coke, laughing.

"Call us up, won't you?" said Rose. "Coke won't be busy now for a while I don't suppose, and we can go places."

"That'll be fine," said Lewis. "Why don't you and your illustrious husband come down some afternoon to rehearsal and watch the girls work out?"

"Maybe we will," said Rose.

"Sure," said Coke.

"Goodnight, dear," said Mrs. Lewis. "Don't get up, please, on my account. Just stay comfy. Goodnight, Mr. Mason. So glad you won your fight."

"Thanks," said Coke.

Lewis offered his hand to Coke and bowed slightly.

"Mason," he said, "now I can tell people that I've shaken hands with the middleweight champion of the world."

Coke grinned and shifted his feet.

When they had gone, Coke said:

"Nice guy, that Lewis."

"Yeah," said Rose; "he's all right. I never knew him very well. But I knew his wife out in Hollywood. She used to be in the scenario department at one of the studios. I don't know what she done. She hasn't got brains enough to write movies."

"No," said Coke; "she don't look it. That takes brains."

"Coke," said Rose, "come over here and give mama a big kiss."

Coke put his arms around Rose and kissed her.

"Not so rough, honey," she said. "I ain't up to par yet."

"Course you're not," said Coke. "How'd you like the story, honey?"

"Great," said Rose. "I'll have to give George a couple of hugs for that."

"You better not," said Coke.

Coke sat on the ottoman at Rose's feet. She bent over and ran her fingers through his hair, curling it, making it stand up in isolated strands.

"Oh, you look funny," she cried, laughing.

"Say," said Coke, "ain't it bad enough without you making it worse?"

Rose leaned over and kissed him.

"You got a cute face, Coke," she said.

"Yeah," said Coke, "like a nice bulldog."

Rose sat looking at Coke, then she said:

"Wasn't it funny for me to run into the Lewises?"

"Yeah," said Coke.

"I got sick of sitting up here all by myself," said Rose; "so I thought I'd go over to the restaurant across the street and get my dinner. Well, who should I bump into but Mrs. Lewis. She nearly dropped over. 'Why, Rose Mason,' she said, 'what are you doing here?' So I told her. I had dinner with them and they come up here with me."

"Well," said Coke, "if you was lonesome, I'm glad they did. It ain't much fun being lonesome."

"I'll say not," said Rose. "They was just lovely to me. They're nice people, Coke."

"Yeah," said Coke. "Lewis is sure a good looking guy. I don't see why he don't get in the movies or something."

"He's just fair," said Rose. "He uses perfume and if there's anything I hate, it's perfume on a man."

Coke grinned.

"Never ketch me with no perfume on," he said.

PART V

I

Two days after his defeat of Soldier Bayliss, a slugging match that greatly increased his popularity, Coke appeared at Kid Halloran's gymnasium in a formfitting overcoat, a derby, and spats. He was wearing a big diamond ring and was carrying a cane. Jeff Davis came over to shake hands with him.

"Hello, champ," he said. "How you feeling?"

"Good," said Coke; "only I got a bad hand from hitting the Soldier."

"Some go," said Jeff.

Coke saw that Jeff was looking him over.

"Well," he said, "what do you think of the get-up?"

"It don't look natural," said Jeff. "I'd rather see you in an old pair of pants and a sweater."

Coke grinned.

"Sure," he said. "I'd feel more comfortable. But I got to dress up now on account of the missus."

"Yeah," said Jeff.

In a moment Coke was surrounded, hands were shoved at him, and everybody talked at once. Across the gymnasium, beyond the noon business men's class, Rattler O'Keefe was working out with Ruby Hall, and Regan was watching him. Coke went over to see Regan, followed by the crowd. Just as Coke came up Ruby Hall sent a left to O'Keefe's ribs and doubled him up,

but O'Keefe crouched and came in for more, shuffling awkwardly.

"That boy's tough," said Jeff. "You should've seen him lay Kid Green flat."

"Hell," said Coke, "the Kid must've run into one."

Regan clapped his hands for the fighters to stop.

"Rattler," he said, "go take a shower."

"Yes sir," said O'Keefe.

Regan saw Coke and called:

"Say, Jeff, introduce me to the Prince of Wales, will you?"

"Hello, champ," said O'Keefe.

"Hello," said Coke. "How they coming?"

"Fine, champ. When you gonna work out with me?"

"I'd do it right now if I didn't have a bad hand," said Coke, smiling.

"All right, Rattler," said Regan; "beat it."

"Yes sir," said O'Keefe and went toward the showers.

"There's a boy that's gonna knock your block off some day," said Regan, taking Coke by the lapels.

Coke pulled away.

"Cut it out," he said. "Quit showing off in public."

Regan rubbed his chin and stared at Coke. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Excuse me," he said. "I forgot you was the champ."

Coke laughed.

"All right, George," he said; "only lay off me in public, see? It don't look right."

"I'll bet the missus taught you that song," said Regan, walking away.

"What's the matter with him?" Coke inquired of Jeff.

"You got me," said Jeff.

Kid Halloran came over to introduce somebody to Coke.

"Mr. Mason," said the Kid, "I want you to meet a friend of mine. Mr. H. W. Coon."

Coke turned. It was one of the fat business men, who worked out feebly every noon in the Kid's gymnasium. He had on a track suit and he looked embarrassed. Coke shook hands with him.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Coon," he said.

"Thank you, champ," said Mr. Coon. "I always did want to shake your hand ever since you licked Prince Pearl. It took you to do it."

"Thanks," said Coke.

"I was just wondering," said Mr. Coon, "if you and your wife wouldn't take lunch with me some day. Any day will do."

Coke looked at Kid Halloran, who winked at him.

"Well," said Coke, "I don't have much time, you know. I'm not downtown much, but I'm gonna meet my wife at The Commander today, so . . ."

"Enough said," Mr. Coon put in. "Make it today. How about two o'clock."

"Well," said Coke, "the only thing is, I was gonna take my manager out to lunch today."

"Oh, you mean Regan," said Mr. Coon. "Well, bring him along. That'll be fine."

"Thanks, Mr. Coon," said Coke.

"I'll see you then," said Mr. Coon.

When he had gone back to his class, the Kid said:

"Cultivate that boy, champ. He's got so much money he don't know what to do with it."

"Yeah?"

"He's rich, that guy," the Kid went on, "and he works every day. He's got a brokerage office or something. Swell guy. That's the kind of people we want to get interested in the game, champ."

"Sure," said Coke.

Regan, who was standing across the ring watching Coke, took a flask out of his pocket and drank, then he put the flask away and came over to him.

"George," said the Kid, "I wish to God you wouldn't do that right out in public. I got to be careful. When you want a drink, go back in the washroom."

"You pugs make me sick," said Regan. "You're getting so damn nice pretty soon you'll be carrying handkerchiefs."

"Give the Kid a break, George," said Coke.

"Yes sir, champion," said Regan, bowing. "I'll also give him a punch in the nose if he gets fresh with me."

Halloran walked away. Coke saw that Regan was beginning to get drunk. He took him by the arm.

"George," he said, "can't you leave that poison alone? It's gonna get you, George."

"Well," said Regan.

"Listen," said Coke, "how about Richy Kelleher? Remember the night he went bugs out in Omaha and a cop had to slug him? Yeah, and remember when we went out to the sanitarium to see him and they wouldn't let us in he was so bad?"

"Yeah, and I remember his funeral," said Regan. "What about it?"

"Well," said Coke, "that's what happens to a guy that can't leave the stuff alone."

"All right," said Regan. "Now I'll tell you one. What happens to a guy that used to be a mechanic's helper that gets up in the world and gets the swellhead?"

"There you go," said Coke. "What makes you think I got the swellhead?"

"Look at them clothes you got on," said Regan, "and look at your nails manicured to the quick. And look at your hair with the grease on it. Even old dumb Jeff says you ain't like you used to be. And if he knows it, everybody knows it."

"Well," said Coke, "that's the missus."

"Everything's the missus!"

"George," said Coke, "you know I got a mighty nice little wife. Now how come I can't do a few things to please her. It don't hurt me none."

"All right," said Regan.

O'Keefe came out of the dressing-room in a navy blue turtle-neck sweater and an old cap.

"What's on for tomorrow, boss?" he asked.

"Take it easy," said Regan, "and remember what I

told you about that left. Practise it tonight in front of a mirror. Tomorrow night we'll give Willis a surprise."

"Gonna come over and see me fight, champ?" O'Keefe inquired.

"Don't think I can make it," said Coke, "but I hope you win."

"Thanks," said O'Keefe, then he turned to go. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

Before he could reach the door he was stopped by half a dozen men, who wanted to exchange a few words with him.

"That kid's gonna be a top-notcher some day," said Regan. "He's got everything but science and I'm learning him that. Best disposition I ever seen."

"He's got too many feet," said Coke.

"Well," said Regan, "you ain't no toe-dancer yourself."

Coke took out a cigar-case. It was leather and had gold and green arabesques on it.

"Take a look at this," he said. "Lewis give it to me."

"Doggy," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke. "It's Italian. It was made in some Italian city. I forget which."

"Well, well," said Regan selecting a cigar.

"Say," said Coke, "that reminds me. We got a date to eat lunch with Mr. Coon, George. Me and the wife and you."

"Yeah? Who's the new boy-friend?"

"He's a rich guy," said Coke. "He's got a big brokerage office or something."

Regan laughed.

"You're getting in Mike Shay's class," he said. "Before long you'll be training at Newport and having tea with Mrs. Whatzerbilt."

Coke grinned.

"Well," he said, "that's all right, ain't it?"

"Yeah," said Regan, "that's fine. But I don't know what you'd do with all the fast ramblers and panhandlers that usually hang around your camp. Course they're gentlemen of leisure, but they don't wash."

II

When Regan and Coke got to The Commander they found Mr. Coon waiting for them, but Rose hadn't arrived yet.

"Hello, Mason," said Coon. "You're on the dot. How are you, Regan? I don't think we've ever been introduced, exactly, but I've seen you quite frequently at Halloran's."

"Yeah," said Regan, shaking hands, "I remember you."

"Well," said Coon, "shall we sit down?"

They all sat on a big lounge overlooking the lobby.

"My wife's always late," said Coke.

"It's a woman's privilege," said Coon.

"One of 'em," Regan put in.

Coon laughed and glanced at Regan.

"You talk as if you didn't like women, Regan," he said.

"They're all right in their place," said Regan, unpleasantly.

Coon flushed slightly and looked at Coke.

"Don't pay no attention to George," said Coke. "That's just his way."

"Yeah," said Regan.

"Well," said Coon, "let's change the subject. Have you picked out your next opponent, Mason?"

"No," said Coke. "I'm gonna take it easy for a while. I might fight Larsen in the summer."

"He's champion now," said Regan, "and he's looking for soft spots."

Coon, disconcerted by Regan's manner, tried to laugh.

"You're way off, George," said Coke. "I never dodged a fight in my life, and I never will."

"Yeah," said Regan. Then he got up. "I'm gonna take a walk. I'll be back in a minute."

When Regan was out of earshot, Coon said:

"He's been drinking, hasn't he?"

"Yeah," said Coke. "He drinks too much. I try to tell him but he won't listen to me."

"Well," said Coon, "liquor's all right; it's the people that use it. Same as religion. I don't go to church myself, but it isn't because I don't think religion's a good thing; it's on account of most of the people I see practising it."

"Yeah," said Coke, "that's right."

"You're not a religious man are you, Mason?"

"No," said Coke. "I suppose I ought to go to church

once in a while. When I was a kid I used to go to Sunday School. George's a Catholic."

"I thought he was, being an Irishman. Well, one religion's as good as another. I haven't any quarrel with any of them. It's the people, that's all. They're not consistent."

Coke said nothing, but nodded and tried to look wise. Turning, he saw Rose coming toward them across the long lobby. She was wearing a leopard coat and a small black hat.

"Here comes the missus," said Coke, jumping to his feet. "Ain't she got the prettiest pair of legs you ever seen?"

Coon laughed.

"Maybe I better not express myself on that subject."

"Hello, Coke," said Rose, coming up to them. "Sorry I'm late."

"That's all right, honey," said Coke. "Me and Mr. Coon here have just been having a talk. This is Mr. Coon. Meet the wife."

"I've heard a lot about you, Mrs. Mason," said Coon, affably; "and I saw your picture in the paper, too. It didn't do you justice."

"Oh, thanks," said Rose. "Are you the Mr. Coon who owns all the horses?"

"Yes," said Coon. "I've got a few runners."

"Well," said Rose, putting her hand on his arm, "I don't know if I'm glad to meet you or not. I lost two dollars on your Flying Cloud yesterday."

"Your husband'll never be able to stand a loss like that," said Coon.

They all laughed. Regan came up to them and said to Rose:

"Well, you finally got here."

Rose looked slightly annoyed.

"Finally," she said.

"I got so tired of waiting," said Regan, "I went downstairs to take a drink and dropped my flask. Can you beat it! I lost a half pint of good liquor just on your account, Rose Mason. Women make me sick."

"I guess you got some of it down your throat," said Rose, drawing away from Regan.

Coon, embarrassed, glanced over the lobby to see if they were being observed.

"Don't high-hat me," said Regan.

"Don't you think we better go in and eat," said Coon.

"No," said Regan, "I lost my appetite now."

"George," said Coke, "snap out of it. You want to spoil our party?"

"Well," said Regan, "it gives me a pain in the neck to stand around and wait for people."

"Can you imagine such manners!" said Rose.

"You've said enough now, George," said Coke flushing. "That'll do."

Regan laughed, turned on his heel and walked away. Coke went after him and took him by the arm, but Regan turned and gave him a push.

"Go on and eat with the big shot," he said. "I'm going over to Mexican Joe's where I can eat with my knife."

"You're drunk, George," said Coke. "You better let me get you a cab."

"Nothing doing," said Regan, walking away.

Coke went back to Coon and Rose.

"I wouldn't stand for that, Coke," said Rose. "If it wasn't for you he'd still be running a pool-room out in the sticks."

Coke stood looking at the floor.

"That's just what I was saying," said Coon. "I was just telling Mr. Mason that liquor's all right; it's the people who use it."

"That's right," said Rose. "I take a drink myself once in a while, but I never had one too many in my life."

"You know," said Coke, "sometimes I think George can't help it. His old man was a periodical drinker."

"It's just lack of backbone," said Coon. "If you want to quit, and will it, you can quit. I stopped smoking over night once, and for six months I never touched tobacco."

"George worries me," said Coke.

"You're not his nurse," said Rose. "If he can't act like a gentleman, that's his tough luck."

"Well," said Coon, "shall we eat?"

"Yes," said Rose, "I'm starved."

Rose took Coon's arm and walked toward the dining-room. Coke followed them reluctantly.

III

"No," said Coke, trying to keep his temper. "I told you I was going down and look after George."

"Well," said Rose, "you're a fine husband, I must say. Rather go look after some bum than go out with your wife."

"George's sick, ain't I been telling you?" said Coke, putting on his overcoat. "We can go over to The Viennese any time. It runs every night. You call the Lewises and tell 'em."

"I'll be damned if I will," said Rose.

"Well," said Coke, "let 'em go to the devil then. I'm looking after George. That guy looked after me when you was out running around the country God knows where."

"Yeah," said Rose, "that ain't all he did. He took you for half of everything you brought in without a contract and then when it looked like you was gonna be champion, he got your name on the dotted line. Don't you worry, old boy. Lewis knows all about it. Everybody does but you."

"Bunk," said Coke. "That's Lewis's story. He forgot to tell you how George loaned me money so I wouldn't have to work in the factory and could train."

"He knew how good you was, Coke," said Rose, moderating her voice, surprised by Coke's obstinance.

"Maybe," said Coke, "but nobody else did. By God, I guess you forget how you used to tell me what a bum I was."

"I was only trying to get you to make something out of yourself," said Rose. "Did you think I wanted to see a guy like you, with stuff in him, working in a factory?"

Coke stood looking at the floor. Rose began to cry.

"I thought you was gonna treat me nice," said Rose. "You get me all upset acting this way, Coke. You know my nerves are bad on account of the flu."

She threw herself into a chair and sobbed.

"Listen, honey," said Coke, "I got to go see George. Mac says nobody can do nothing with him. He's all shot."

"Well, how about me?" Rose demanded. "To hear you tell it, you'd think I was in perfect health. Ain't I as important as George Regan?"

"Course you are, honey."

"Coke," said Rose, looking up through her lashes, "ain't I more important?"

"Course you are," said Coke, bending down and kissing her.

"Well, then," said Rose, pouting.

Coke, badgered beyond endurance, burst out:

"But I tell you it's different! We can go to night clubs any night. See what I mean? We can go any night, and it won't hurt you none to stay home one night, will it? I got to see George, Rose. I just got to."

Rose got up and went into the bedroom, slamming the door. The phone rang. It was McNeil. He told Coke that George was worse and wanted to see him.

"It ain't nothing serious, is it?" asked Coke.

"I don't hardly think so," said McNeil. "But he don't seem like George Regan. He just don't give a damn for nothing. He's been on a four day jag and he can't stand it like he used to."

"I'll be right over," said Coke, hanging up the receiver.

Rose opened the bedroom door.

"I heard you," she said.

"He's worse," said Coke. "I'm going down and get a taxi." He hesitated. "Say, Rose, why don't you and the Lewises go on over to The Viennese? I'll get there as soon as I can."

Rose didn't say anything.

"Yeah," said Coke; "I'll get the porter to have the garage man send the car over, see? He'll send somebody to drive it for you."

"Coke," said Rose, putting her hands on his shoulders, "we ought to have a chauffeur. But you'll never listen to me."

"Well," said Coke, "I'll see what I can do about that tomorow."

"Will you, honey?" said Rose.

"Yeah, cross my heart," said Coke.

Rose kissed him.

"Mama's sorry," she said; "but mama didn't want her boy to run away and leave her all alone."

"I know," said Coke. "You get the Lewises and go on now, honey, and I'll be there just as soon as I can get there."

"Maybe I better invite Mr. Coon too," said Rose; "he's such a nice fellow."

"Sure," said Coke; "that's fine."

He kissed Rose and then started for the door.

"Goodbye, honey," he said.

"Goodbye, Coke," said Rose. "Sorry we had to have a row like that."

IV

When Coke came in Regan was lying on the bed fully dressed. His face, usually swarthy, was pale, and his hands shook. Jeff was sitting at the head of the bed looking at the pictures in a magazine, and McNeil was stretched out on a lounge.

"Hello, Coke," said Regan.

"Hello," said Coke, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "They tell me you ain't feeling so good."

"Too much gin," said Regan, trying to laugh.

"Did you get a doctor, Mac?" asked Coke.

"Yeah," said McNeil, "and he read George the riot act. If he puts any more of that poison in him, the doctor gives him up."

"Yeah," said Regan, "I tried to drink with Riley, but it can't be done. We was going to take a train for Frisco, but I passed out in the station."

"Why Frisco?" Coke inquired.

"Well," said Regan, "I don't know. I wanted to go to Mexico, but Riley was set on Frisco and I didn't want to bust up the party."

Coke glanced at McNeil, who shook his head slightly.

"Yeah," said Coke. "Say, George, don't you think you better get your clothes off and go to bed?"

"No," said Regan; "if I take my clothes off I'll go to sleep and I don't want to go to sleep; I get nightmares."

"Hell," said Coke.

"Straight," said Regan. "I see things."

"Well," said McNeil, "you ought to be glad you don't see 'em with your eyes open."

Jeff looked at his watch.

"Time for your medicine, boss," he said.

Regan shook his head.

"I won't take that stuff. It tastes like hell."

Jeff got the bottle and spoon, and handed them to Coke. Coke read the instructions and poured out a dose.

"George," he said, "you mean to tell me you ain't got guts enough to take a little medicine?"

"Who says I ain't!" cried Regan.

"Well," said Coke, "here you are."

Regan swallowed the medicine and made a face.

"Boy!" he said; "that's powerful stuff."

Coke gave him a drink of water, then he said:

"Now, George, I'm gonna help you off with your clothes. You don't need to go to sleep. Just rest. I'll sit here and talk to you."

"All right," said Regan.

Jeff and Coke undressed him and got him into his

pajamas. Regan, sweating from weakness, lay down and closed his eyes for a moment, then he asked for a cigar. Coke took out his case and handed him one.

"Still got the pretty case, have you?" said Regan. "Coke Mason, the fashion-plate champion."

"That sounds more like it," said McNeil. "You're beginning to talk like George Regan."

Coke grinned and lit Regan's cigar for him. Regan could hardly keep his eyes open, but he propped himself up to fight off his drowsiness.

"George," said Coke, "who do you think's gonna win the big heavyweight match?"

"What does it matter?" said Regan. "They're just a couple of bums getting money under false pretences. You could lick either one of them. Say, that reminds me, Mike Shay can't make the middleweight grade no more. I got it straight. Riley told me."

"A good lightheavy'll kill him," said Coke.

"It depends," said Regan.

McNeil and Jeff sat watching Regan, whose eyes were closing. Coke went on talking in low tones about fights, about Prince Pearl, about anything he could think of. In half an hour, Regan was asleep, snoring.

"Poor devil," said McNeil. "When he lays off the booze, there ain't a smarter guy in the game. But when he's drinking, he's no good on earth."

"It'll get him," said Jeff.

"Yeah," said McNeil. "That doctor give him a good scaring, but it won't last. He'll lay off for a while, then he'll start all over."

Coke sat looking at Regan, whose face was pale and drawn.

"This is the worst I ever seen him," said Jeff.

"Yeah," said McNeil, "and every time from now on it'll be worse. There ain't no hope for them periodical drinkers."

Coke got up and put on his hat.

"I got to be moving," he said. "We got a table over at The Viennese. The missus is already there. If anything happens, you know where to get me, Mac."

"All right," said Mac.

"One of you guys better stay right here with him all night."

"I'll stay," said Jeff.

Coke went out. The doorman got a taxi for him. On the way to The Viennese Coke sat looking out the taxi window. He thought how he and George used to shoot pool till midnight and then go and get a hotdog and a cup of coffee at the Greek's next door. He remembered how they used to go fishing and sit under big straw hats and pull in catfish and drink beer. He remembered the Sunday excursions to Cleveland and the moonlight boat trips to Detroit. George was always good company.

"Well," said Coke, "I don't know."

V

WHILE Coke was taking off his coat one of the checkgirls whispered to the other:

"Coke Mason!"

Coke heard her and turned around, smiling.

"You girls fight fans?"

"No, sir," said one of them; "but we seen your picture in the papers."

"Yeah," said the other. "My brother seen you fight at The Coliseum."

"Yeah?" said Coke, smiling. "I'll see you girls on my way out."

The headwaiter came up to him.

"One, sir?"

"No; I got a party here. I'm Coke Mason."

"Yes sir, yes sir," said the headwaiter, bowing; "right this way, Mr. Mason."

He led Coke through the crowded nightclub to a round table near the dancefloor. Coon, in evening clothes, was talking very earnestly to Rose, who was sitting with her elbows on the table. Lewis and his wife were leaning back in their chairs watching a negro entertainer on the dancefloor.

"Well," said Coke, "here I am."

Coon and Lewis both got up to shake hands with him.

"How's George?" Rose inquired.

"He'll be all right," said Coke. "I got him to bed finally. He looks bad though."

"Your wife was telling us," said Coon.

They all sat down.

"I think it's awful the way some men drink," said Mrs. Lewis.

"Isn't it!" said Coon. "I always say that liquor's all right; it's the people that use it."

"My sentiments exactly," said Lewis.

The Master of Ceremonies came over to their table and put his hand on the back of Coke's chair.

"Mr. Mason," he said, "I'd like to introduce you from the floor."

"What?" exclaimed Coke, glancing up.

"We always introduce the celebrities, Mr. Mason," said the Master of Ceremonies; "it's one of our customs."

"Go ahead, Mason," said Coon, who applauded loudly.

"Listen," said Coke, "it's all right with me, but don't expect me to make no speech."

"Oh, no," said the Master of Ceremonies; "just come out on the dancefloor when I signal you, and sort of bow."

"I'll mit 'em," said Coke.

The Master of Ceremonies looked puzzled, but nodded.

"Great to be famous, eh Lewis?" said Coon.

Rose smiled across at Coke and said:

"He's just my big boy."

"Sure," said Coke.

The Master of Ceremonies walked to the center of the dancefloor, held up his hands for silence, and said:

"Friends, I want you to meet a man who is at present the most popular pugilistic figure in New York. Many of you saw him on that historic night when he de-

feated one of the greatest fighters of all time, Mr. Mike Shay, for the middleweight championship of the world." The Master of Ceremonies motioned for Coke to come to the dancefloor. "Let me introduce Mr. Coke Mason!"

Coke shuffled out onto the floor grinning. They turned the spotlight on him and he blinked. The crowd laughed and applauded. Coke mitted them, bowing slightly.

"Speech! Speech! Speech!" they shouted.

Coke grinned and shook his head.

"No," he cried. "I make my speeches with these." He held up his hands.

There was much laughter and prolonged applause. Coke shook hands with the Master of Ceremonies, and went back to his table.

"Well," said Lewis, "didn't he rise to the occasion, though! Good work, Mason."

"Mama's proud," said Rose.

"You should be," said Coon. "You chose just the right words, Mason. Leave speech making to Senators and other bores. Hurray for Coke Mason."

Coke glanced at Coon, puzzled. Coon's face was red and his eyes bulged. He was drunk.

"If it had been Paul," said Mrs. Lewis, "he'd've talked till they stopped him."

"Now, my dear!" said Lewis.

Lewis was always suave, never raised his voice, was almost always smiling, or nearly smiling; but sometimes the look in his eyes chilled Coke. Mrs. Lewis,

when reproved, usually quailed, but this time she returned the stare.

"Folks," she said, "before I forget about it, I'd like to announce something."

"Announce it from the dancefloor," said Coon.

"Why, Harold!" exclaimed Rose, hitting him on the shoulder.

"Don't remind me," said Coon; then apologetically to Coke: "I must be a little drunk. Am I becoming noticeable?"

"No," said Coke.

"Go on with your announcement, dear," said Rose.

"Well," said Mrs. Lewis, "Paul and I are going to separate."

"What!" exclaimed Rose. "Really?"

"Not permanently," said Lewis, taking a drink and glancing at his wife. "Louise has got an offer to come back to Hollywood, you see. My business keeps me here."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Lewis. "I ran short of money in New York, so I have to go back to work."

Coke looked from one to the other, puzzled.

"What's the matter, Lewis," said Coke; "are you flat?"

"He's not," said Mrs. Lewis. "But I am."

"But . . ." said Coke.

"I don't see why you had to bring this up, Louise," said Lewis. "But a little liquor always makes you talkative."

"Now, now," said Coon. "I won't have quarrelling."

"Well," said Mrs. Lewis, "I'm going away at the end of the week and I want my friends to know it."

"You see," said Lewis, "our marriage is on a purely business basis. We both contribute to the upkeep of everything."

Coke laughed.

"That's a good one," he said.

"Coke," Rose put in, "you musn't laugh."

"It's quite all right," said Lewis.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lewis, "it's a good joke on me, after the way I spent my money."

"Louise," said Lewis, "you've said plenty. If you go on talking like that, I'm going home."

The jazzband began to play. Coon waved his arms.

"Forget your troubles," he cried. "On with the dance."

Rose leaned over and whispered to Coke:

"Dance with Mrs. Lewis, honey. It'll cheer her up."

"Sure," said Coke. He got up and stood behind Mrs. Lewis's chair. "Can I have this dance?"

"Certainly," said Mrs. Lewis, getting up.

They stepped out onto the crowded dancefloor and began to dance. Mrs. Lewis was heavy and hard to lead; Coke was a very poor dancer; but as the floor was jammed this didn't matter much. Coke looked back at the table and saw that Rose, Coon, and Lewis, all standing, were having an argument of some sort. He paid no attention to the men, but stared at Rose. She was wearing a yellow evening-gown, which clung snugly to her slender body, and she was perched on extremely high heels.

"Ain't my wife got the littlest feet you ever seen?" Coke demanded.

"She's very small," said Mrs. Lewis.

Coke laughed.

"She puts my shoes on over hers and walks all over the apartment. It looks awful funny."

Mrs. Lewis said nothing.

"Yeah," said Coke, "I can't even get my hands in her shoes."

"Mr. Coon thinks your wife's quite a beauty," said Mrs. Lewis.

"Well, she is," said Coke.

"Mr. Coon's trying to persuade her to go back on the stage in Paul's new show."

"I won't let her," said Coke. "They better not say nothing to me about it."

"Maybe you'll change your mind," said Mrs. Lewis.

A couple collided violently with them. When the man saw who he had run into, he ducked behind the girl's shoulder in mock fright.

"Don't hit me, Mason," he said.

Coke grinned.

"Nice bunch of people here," said Coke.

"I'm sick of nightclubs," said Mrs. Lewis.

"I like 'em," said Coke. "Course I ain't a drinker, or nothing like that. I drink beer once in a while. But I like the music and seeing people."

The music stopped. Coke saw Rose and Coon at the far end of the dancefloor. Before the music started up again, Lewis left the table and took Rose from Coon.

"Them two guys are playing tag with my wife," said Coke.

"They've been doing it all evening," said Mrs. Lewis.

"That's the way she always was," said Coke. "When she was a kid about thirteen the boys used to be always hanging after her."

"No doubt," said Mrs. Lewis.

When the dance was over Coon, who had danced the final encore with Rose, led her back to the table, leaning over her, talking earnestly. Lewis sat at the table watching them, and he was so absorbed that he forgot to get up when Coke seated his wife.

"What's the matter, Paul?" Mrs. Lewis inquired. "Preoccuppied?"

Lewis got to his feet.

"Didn't see you, Louise," he said.

"I noticed," said Mrs. Lewis.

"My God," said Coke, falling into his chair, "look at me sweating! I can sure pare my weight down dancing."

"Isn't it the truth!" said Coon. "By the way, Mason, when're you going to box with me? Listen, folks, Mason has promised to box with me down at Halloran's gymnasium."

"I'd like to see that," said Lewis, smiling.

"Oh, he'll be gentle with me, won't you, Mason?"

"Sure," said Coke.

"We'll make a party of it," said Lewis; "we'll all go down and watch."

"No," said Coon; "I refuse to fight before ladies. I'm much too brutal."

Rose burst out laughing.

"Oh, Harold!" she cried.

VI

Coke took his clothes off and put on pajamas and a bathrobe. Rose was lying on a lounge in her black kimono, smoking a cigarette and watching Coke.

"You sure got a build, big boy," she said. "Where'd you get all that muscle?"

"Training," said Coke. "When I first started out I used to train with Jimmy Pappas, the wrestler, and it sure put the muscle on me. I got too much in the shoulders for a good boxer. I'm damn near muscle-bound. But that's what puts 'em down when I hit 'em with that left hook."

"I'd hate to get hit with that," said Rose. "That'd be the end of me."

"Don't you never worry, honey," said Coke, grinning.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Who do you suppose that is!" exclaimed Rose, impatiently.

"Who's there?" called Coke.

"Bell-boy."

Coke went over and opened the door. The bell-boy handed Coke a magazine.

"The manager sent this up, Mr. Mason," said the

bell-boy. "He thought maybe it might interest you."

"Yeah?" said Coke. "Thanks, buddy."

The bell-boy turned to go, but Coke told him to wait and went over to his trousers and took out a handful of change, which he gave to the bell-boy. The bell-boy thanked him and closed the door.

"What's the idea!" said Rose.

"You got me," said Coke.

He turned the pages of the magazine till he came to an article headed: When He Fights Something Always Happens. There he was with his hair on end and a grin spread over his face.

"Listen, kid," he said, excitedly. "Coke (Iron Man) Mason, the idol of the fistic fans. A fighter of the old school who would be as much at home with bare knuckles as he is with five ounce gloves. Conqueror of Prince Pearl, Larsen, Bat Cahill, Joe Savella, Mike Shay and Soldier Bayliss. He has cleaned up the Middleweight ranks and now, like Alexander, is looking for new worlds to conquer."

Coke scratched his head.

"Who's Alexander?" he said. "I never heard of him."

"He's a general or something," said Rose. "My God, you're dumb!"

"Well," said Coke, "what they want to put his name in here for?"

Rose burst out laughing, and getting to her feet she took the magazine away from Coke and lay down again.

"Give me that," said Coke. "I ain't finished it yet."

"No," said Rose, pushing him away; "I want to read all about my big, strong, cute, dumb papa."

"Sure I'm dumb," said Coke. "I never had no education. I can't help it."

"Mama was just kidding," said Rose, putting the magazine down and holding out her arms to him. "You're smart enough to make lots of money, and that's plenty smart."

"Sure," said Coke, grinning.

He lay down on the lounge with Rose.

"Ooch over," he said.

"God, do you want all the room," said Rose. "I'm glad we got twin beds, even if we don't use 'em much."

VII

Coke was sitting in an armchair by the window, and Rose was pacing up and down. They had just returned from seeing Mrs. Lewis off. Coon and Lewis were waiting downstairs for them. But Coke was tired.

"Can't we call this off?" said Coke. "You know I ain't used to this staying up till three o'clock every night. I feel stale."

"All you do is crab parties," said Rose. "You suggested this yourself."

"Yeah," said Coke; "but I was full of beer then. Now I don't feel like going. For God's sake, Rose, can't you stay home one night."

"If you had your way," said Rose, "you'd plant me

here so I couldn't do nothing but read magazines, then you'd go running after your bum friends. Let me tell you something, if you bring that Jeff Davis up here again, I'm gonna get an apartment of my own."

"Say, what's wrong with Jeff?"

"He looks like a cross between a gunman and a what-is-it!"

"Well," said Coke, "I ain't no beauty myself."

"You look all right," said Rose. "You look like other people, but Jeff's got a cauliflower ear and how he dresses!"

The phone rang. Rose ran to answer it. It was Coon. He told her that Marty Wills, the comedian, and his wife had joined the party and they were all patiently waiting. Rose was so excited and talked so rapidly that Coke could hardly make out what she was saying.

"Marty Wills is a big shot, Coke," she said. "When you travel with him, you're traveling."

"No," said Coke, flushing. "I'm not going, goddam it! I guess I ought to know what I want to do, oughtn't I? I don't care if President Coolidge is down there."

"All you think about is yourself," said Rose. "I never seen such a selfish guy."

"I'm not selfish," said Coke. "But I guess I can do what I want to once in a while, can't I?"

"Do what you please," said Rose. "Only why don't you let me do what I please?"

"You want to go without me?" Coke inquired.

"Yes," said Rose.

"Well, go then," said Coke.

Rose hastily wrapped a cloak around her and went out. Coke got up, took a magazine from a table, and threw it against the wall. Then he lay down on the lounge, put his hands under his head, and stared at the ceiling.

"Maybe I better go," he thought. "It won't look right."

The phone rang. It was Coon, who politely requested that he go with them.

"No," said Coke, "I'm tired. I'm gonna get a rest."

He slammed up the receiver.

"Think they can tell me what to do!" he said.

He lay down on the lounge again and stared at the ceiling. Little by little his resentment left him and he fell asleep. When he woke up the clock was just striking twelve. He got to his feet and started to undress, but stopped and stood looking at himself in a mirror. He smiled, showing his teeth; he took a brush and tried to brush his hair flat; he pulled his collar low and tightened his tie, in imitation of Lewis.

"No use," he said to his image in the mirror; "you'd look better in a sweater."

He walked about the room, not knowing what to do with himself; then, finally, whistling out of boredom, he sat down and picked up a newspaper. He read the fight news with slight interest and threw the paper on the floor. He tried a magazine, but could find nothing to hold his attention. He walked over to the radio and tentatively fiddled with the dial, but, shrugging his shoulders, he turned off the current before he

had located a station. Finally he put on his coat and hat and went out. There were vacant taxis standing in front of the hotel, but he started out on foot. It was nine blocks to the hotel where Regan lived, and before Coke reached it, he felt better.

"By God," he thought; "I need exercise. I'm gonna get myself in shape."

Jeff opened the door to let him in. Riley, Regan, Mandl and Cahill were playing poker. Regan was the big winner; Mandl the big loser.

"There's my jinx," said Regan. "Who asked for you, anyway?"

"Just thought I'd drop in and see how you was," said Coke, sitting down.

"Pretty fair," said Regan; "and laying off the booze. Say, Coke, are you getting fat?"

"Yeah," said Coke; "I put on ten or twelve pounds."

"Better cut it out," said Regan.

"I can take it off," said Coke.

"Calling," said Mandl.

Regan laid down three aces.

"My God!" cried Mandl, slamming down his cards. "Where do you keep 'em, up your sleeve?"

"You can stay, Coke," said Regan. "I guess you ain't gonna jinx me tonight. Where's the missus?"

Coke hesitated.

"She's home," he said.

"Getting her trained, are you, boy?" Cahill put in.

"Mighty sweet kid," said Riley. "If I had a kid like that I'd be home with her."

"Seen her the other day," said Mandl. "Down at The Commander with some big fat guy."

Regan kicked Mandl under the table.

"Yeah?" said Coke.

"That is, I thought it was her," said Mandl, "Has she got a big black fur coat?"

"No," said Coke.

"Well, it wasn't then," said Mandl.

Coke laughed.

"I thought you was way off," he said.

The cards were dealt again. Regan opened and Cahill stayed. Regan bet.

"Up one," said Cahill. "I'm gonna keep you honest, George."

"All right," said Regan. "Up five more."

"I ain't curious," said Cahill.

Regan showed his openers and threw the rest of his hand into the discard.

"Come on, Coke," said Regan. "Pull up a chair and get a stack."

"No," said Coke. "I might just as well hand you guys my money. You're too smart for me."

"Too smart for me, too," said Mandl; "but I ain't got such good sense as you got."

But the next hand, Mandl drew to a pair of aces and caught an ace full. Regan was out, both Cahill and Riley had fair hands and stayed. Mandl won a big pot. He reached over and put his hand on Coke's shoulder.

"Stick around, champ," he said. "Maybe I can get even before the winners want to quit."

"Did you hear me make any crack about quitting?" Regan inquired.

Jeff came over and sat down beside Coke.

"Champ," he said, "you missed something when you missed the O'Keefe-Willis go. I never seen such a battle. Just like Firpo and Dempsey."

"I read about it," said Coke.

"I won a hundred bucks on that bum," said Mandl.

"You plunger," said Riley.

"Well," said Mandl, "you don't expect me to bet my roll on a guy that tramps on his own feet, do you?"

"You wait," said Regan. "When our friend William Coke Mason retires, O'Keefe's gonna fill his shoes."

"That's the only way he will," said Coke.

"All right," said Regan. "But anyway Joe Savella thinks he's good enough."

"You gonna match him with Joe?" asked Coke.

"We'll sign up this week," said Regan. "And if he licks old Joe, Bat's gonna give him a match."

"Well," said Riley, "I'll say one thing for the Rattler, it'll take a damn good man to knock him out. That guy Willis hit him on the jaw so many times he sprained his wrist."

"He's tough," said Jeff.

"Some day I'll hit him with a left hook just to show you guys how tough he is," said Coke.

He got up and put on his coat.

"Well," said Regan, "he wants to work out with you, Coke."

"I'll drop down to the gym some time," said Coke, "and we'll go a couple of rounds."

He put on his hat.

"Remember me to the missus," said Regan.

"All right," said Coke; then: "Say, George, why don't you never drop around and see us?"

"I'm waiting to be invited," said Regan.

"Say," said Coke, "don't I come to see you without being invited?"

"Sure," said Regan, "but I ain't got no frau. Anyway, I might run into some of your Four Hundred friends and I'd shock 'em to death."

Everybody laughed.

"None of you guys ever look me up any more," said Coke. "None of you guys ever drop around to see me except Jeff."

Jeff grinned and shifted.

"Well," said Regan, "you're the champion now, my boy, and champions are exclusive."

"Don't let him kid you," said Cahill.

Coke smiled and stood silent, looking at the floor. The players went on with their game.

"Well," said Coke, "so long."

He went out. The wind was cold now and he took a taxi. It was about one thirty when he got up to his room. He undressed and put on his pajamas, then he lay down and began reading a magazine. He was asleep when the clock struck two.

At two-thirty Rose came in. Coke opened his eyes and sat up.

"Well," he said, "sure is time you was coming home."

"Coke," cried Rose, running over to him and putting her arms around him, "listen, I got the best news."

"All right," said Coke. "What is it?"

"You love your mama, don't you, honey?" said Rose, kissing him. "You ain't mad cause mama went and left you, are you?"

"No," said Coke.

"You want your mama to have a good time, don't you, Coke? You want her to be happy and contented, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Well," said Rose, cuddling up to him, "I got good news. Ivor Martin was down to The Viennese, and he came over to our table. When Paul told him who I was, he asked me why I didn't go back in the show business. But I said, 'Because my papa don't want me to.' But he kept insisting, Coke, and so finally we all went to a back room and he gave me a try-out."

"Yeah?"

"Well," said Rose, "I sang a couple of songs for him and danced. Did he like it? Ask Marty Wills. He said he had a spot for me in his big show. Not a chorus job, but a spot, Coke, a spot. But I told him I couldn't do nothing till I saw my papa."

"That's right," said Coke, scratching his head. "You don't need to go back in the business, Rose. Ain't

I got plenty of money? Don't I give you everything you want?"

"Oh, but I want to," said Rose. " 'Tain't every girl that gets a chance to be in one of Ivor Martin's shows. It'd be great, Coke. Just think: little Rose with a spot in one of Ivor Martin's big shows. Only one season, Coke; that'd be enough. Just for the fun of it."

"I don't like it," said Coke. "I never would see you, honey."

"Course you would, Coke. You could meet me every night, and we'd have every day together. Be a sport, Coke!"

"I don't get the idea," said Coke, getting up and walking back and forth. "You got wonderful clothes, and a nice apartment and a big car and a chauffeur. What's the idea?"

"Let me ask you something," said Rose. "Remember that magazine the manager sent up here for you with your picture in it and all that?"

"Yeah," said Coke.

"Well," said Rose, "did you get a kick out of it, or didn't you?"

"Sure I did," said Coke. "I like to read articles about myself."

"Well," said Rose, "so do I. Everybody does, see? I want to be doing something for myself, Coke; so I won't feel like I don't amount to nothing. As it is, I'm just the champion's wife, that's all."

"Ain't that something?" asked Coke.

"Yeah, but it ain't to my credit. Anybody could be that."

"Oh no they couldn't."

"Well, in a way they could. Don't be so stubborn, Coke. Lots of husbands would be tickled to death to see their wives picked out like I was without trying or nothing."

"I bet Lewis done it," said Coke. "He and Coon are always talking about you going back on the stage. Lewis works for Martin, don't he? I bet he pulled the whole thing."

"Well, you just call him up and ask him if he did," said Rose.

Coke didn't say anything.

"Just call him up and ask him."

Coke sat down and stared at the floor. He didn't know what to do.

Rose went into the bedroom, took off her dress, and put on a kimono. When she came back into the living-room, Coke was still sitting with his elbows on his knees, looking at the floor.

"Coke," she said, "suppose I said to you, 'Don't fight no more. I don't want you fighting. I want you to stick around home all the time.' "

Coke just looked at her.

"You got money enough, Coke," she went on. "You got enough money out of that fight with Bayliss to last you the rest of your life, and you know it. What's the idea, then? Why don't you quit fighting?"

"I like it," said Coke. "I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

"Don't you suppose other people feel that way? It ain't just the money, and you know it."

"No," said Coke, "it ain't. But women are different. When they get married, they ought to settle down and let their husbands look after 'em. That's what I say."

"You're behind the times, honey," said Rose, going over to him and putting her arms around him. "That's old fashioned."

"I'm old fashioned," said Coke. "I don't like the way people do things now. You'd never ketch my mother talking like you talk."

"Times have changed, honey," said Rose, kissing him. "Women don't take a back seat nowadays."

"No," said Coke; "you said a mouthful."

He pushed Rose away, got up and stood looking down into the empty street. Rose lit a cigarette and watched him.

"Well," said Coke, "I always wanted you just to have nice things and take it easy and have women friends and play bridge and stuff like that, like women do. I thought since I made a pile of money that everything'd go along smooth and we'd just kind of have a good time. But I guess you don't see things that way."

He rubbed his hands over his face.

"Listen, Rose," he went on, "I don't want you moping around here saying I won't let you do nothing. If you want to go back on the stage, go!"

He went into the bedroom and closed the door. But Rose followed him and called:

"Honey, come here. I want to show you something."

Coke came back.

"Sit over there," said Rose, pointing to the lounge.

Coke obeyed. Rose twisted the dial of the radio till she found some jazz music; then she took off her kimona and began to dance. Coke sat watching her sullenly for a moment, then little by little his face lit up and he began to grin. When she had finished, he got up and applauded loudly.

"You'll knock 'em dead, kid," he cried. "Just as sure as shooting, you'll knock 'em dead."

"Ketch me," said Rose.

Coke spread his feet apart and set himself. Rose ran across the room and flung herself into his arms.

"Alley-up!" cried Rose.

VIII

When Coke came in Rose, Lewis, Ada Berger, one of Martin's stars, Coon, and Marty Wills and his wife were all sitting in the living-room.

"Hail the champion!" said Marty Wills, jumping to attention and saluting.

Coke was received with shouts and laughter. But Rose seemed sullen. Lewis took Coke by the arm and said:

"Your wife just had a very unpleasant experience."

"Yeah?" said Coke.

"We were all standing down in the lobby," Lewis went on, "when Regan and Urban Riley came in. They were looking for you. Rose told them that you'd be here in a few minutes, to wait."

"Yeah," said Coke.

"Well, Regan was slightly drunk, and you know how he is. Good fellow otherwise, but unpleasant when he's drunk. Rose was nice to him, but he proceeded to wisecrack everybody and make a show of himself. Riley tried to make him behave. But it wasn't any use. Pretty soon Rose told him to come upstairs with the rest of the party and wait, but he said, 'No; too damn many ham actors to suit me.' "

Coke stood looking at the floor. Rose came over to them.

"What did you want to tell him for!" she demanded. "He swears by George Regan."

"He ought to know it," said Lewis.

"Yeah," said Coke, "much obliged."

"I wasn't going to tell you, Coke," said Rose.

Coke said nothing but went into the bedroom, took off his coat, and sat down in a chair beside the window. In the living-room somebody turned on the radio and they all began to dance. Coke sat looking down into the street. Gradually the noise from the next room became blurred and faint; it seemed far away; he closed his eyes and began to nod. He saw Lake Erie with the sun on it: he and George were sitting in a battered rowboat drinking beer. In a moment he was asleep.

Rose was shaking him. He rubbed his eyes and looked up at her.

"Old man," she said, "you been sleeping for one solid hour."

"I was tired," said Coke.

"We're all going down to rehearsal," said Rose. "If you're tired you can stay here."

"All right," said Coke.

"Listen, Coke," said Rose. "Don't say nothing to George. He was drunk."

"I wish he wouldn't act that way," said Coke.

Rose made up her face and wrapped a cloak around her.

"Good-bye, papa," she said.

"Good-bye," said Coke.

She went out. Coke sat listening. When the hubbub of voices had ceased, he pulled himself to his feet yawning and stretching, and opened the door into the living-room. Everybody had gone but Coon and Lewis. Coon was standing with his back to the wall and Lewis had him by the arms, shaking him. Coon's face was pasty and pale.

"Hey," said Coke, "what's going on here?"

Coon started and stood with his mouth open, but Lewis released Coon, turned and smiled blandly.

"Just a little argument, Mason," he said.

"Yeah?" said Coke looking from one to the other.

"Just a little argument," said Coon.

"I gave Coon some money to bet for me," said

Lewis, "quite a bit, and due to a misunderstanding, I guess, he put it on the wrong horse."

"Yes," said Coon; "that's it. Just a misunderstanding."

Coke grinned.

"I'm surprised at you guys fighting over money," he said.

PART VI

I

THE main-go was on when Lewis and Coke took their seats. O'Keefe was shuffling around the ring trying to catch up with old Joe Savella, who eluded him, rushed him when he wasn't looking for it, and hit him with a left so many times that at the end of the round O'Keefe's face was beefy. Regan saw Coke and waved to him. McNeil and Jeff were working on O'Keefe, who was grinning and seemed fresh.

"Joe'll lick him sure," said Coke.

"He's made for him," said Lewis.

The second round was the same as the first, except that O'Keefe took more lefts in the face. But the lefts didn't stop him and he hounded old Joe from corner to corner, shuffling, throwing rights, and wading in wide open.

"Stamina's all he's got," said Lewis.

"Yeah," said Coke. "But if Joe could hit the fight'd be over."

During the third and fourth rounds O'Keefe continued to take lefts, but he was increasing the pace and Savella was tiring. In the fifth Savella showed unmistakable signs of weariness, but O'Keefe seemed fresher than ever and shuffled after Joe and drove him against the ropes time after time. Joe clinched and rested, but his arms were weary and his legs were

wavering. In the sixth Joe spurted and upset O'Keefe with a series of perfect body punches, but O'Keefe, without waiting for a count, leapt up and mauled Joe all over the ring.

Coke sat biting his lips.

"That Irish boy's going to win," said Lewis.

"Yeah," said Coke; "old Joe's about through, I guess."

In the seventh and eighth rounds Joe gave a wonderful exhibition of emergency fighting, staying in close to O'Keefe, tying him up, making him miss. Toward the end of the eighth round, O'Keefe, trying for a knockout, missed a wild right swing and fell head first through the ropes, nearly falling into the crowd. For the rest of the round, Savella kept him on the ropes, pummelling him. But it was no use. O'Keefe seemed as fresh as at the beginning, fresher even; and Savella was nearly through. In the ninth, O'Keefe landed three or four hard body punches, followed by a right uppercut to the jaw, and Savella went down for the count.

"Well," said Lewis.

"I'll have to work out with that kid," said Coke.

He glanced up. There was O'Keefe, twenty-three years old, freckled and homely, with big shoulders and small legs— Young Fitz, the papers called him—grinning from ear to ear, calm and fresh. Coke clenched his hands.

"Yeah," he said; "I'll have to work out with that boy."

A newspaper man hurried over to Coke.

"Well, champ," he said, "what do you think of the kid?"

"Well," said Coke, "stamina's about all he's got. Wait till Cahill gets through with him."

"You must admit though," said the writer, "that Joe Savella is one of the best fighters in the business."

"Yeah," said Coke; "but he's about through now. He's getting old."

Regan came over and put his hand on Coke's shoulder.

"Well," he said, "you and your boy-friend here saw a real fighter tonight. A near champion."

"He wouldn't last one round with Coke," said Lewis.

"No; he's meat for me," said Coke.

"I ain't so sure," said Regan. "Not with that belly on you."

"I'll show you," said Coke.

II

Everybody who heard about the exhibition match between young O'Keefe and the champion turned up at Halloran's gymnasium: admission fifty cents.

Coke came in with Lewis and went straight to his dressing-room. Regan followed him.

"Take it easy with the kid, Coke," said Regan. "Don't try to show off, just because you got a crowd."

"I can't pull punches," said Coke. "We'll have the big mits on, won't we?"

"Sure," said Regan; "but you got dynamite in that left and I don't want the kid hurt."

"Hell," said Coke, "I won't hurt him."

Regan went out.

"It's funny," said Lewis.

"What's funny," demanded Coke.

"Why," said Lewis, hitting at one of his spats with his cane, "you'd think to hear Regan talk, that O'Keefe was the champion and you were just some tough pug. If I was Regan I'd be worrying about you, not O'Keefe. Not that you can't lick this kid, but people do get hurt in the ring, you know. Foul blows and spills."

Coke didn't say anything, but he sat thinking.

When Lewis and Coke came out of the dressing-room, O'Keefe was already in the ring, waiting. Coke, looking over the crowd, saw Coon sitting near his corner.

"There's Coon," said Coke.

"I see him," said Lewis.

"Say," said Coke, "what's wrong between you two guys? You act awful funny lately."

"We don't get along, that's all."

"Why, I think Coon's a pretty nice fellow," said Coke.

"We don't hit it off," said Lewis, sitting down.

Coke went over and shook hands with Coon.

"I'm waiting to see something, champ," said Coon.

When Coke climbed through the ropes, O'Keefe got up, ran across the ring and shook hands with him.

"Hello, champ," he said. "Mighty nice of you to come down and work out with me."

Coke couldn't resist O'Keefe's genuine friendliness. He put his arm around O'Keefe.

"Nice fight you fought the other night, kid," he said. "I had you on the short end sure."

"Well," said O'Keefe, "Joe's a great fighter, but I'm a lot younger."

"Yeah," said Coke; "that counts."

The crowd around the ring gave them a big hand and they both grinned and mitted the crowd. Regan stepped into the ring and held up his hands for silence.

"Folks," he said, "this is more than just an ordinary work-out. As you all know I'm managing both these boys, and they're both mighty good boys, if anybody should ask you, and we decided it'd be pretty nice if the champ would work out with the kid, over here. The champ's O.K. as you all know, and he's for giving a comer a break. So here we are, folks; just a little exhibition with the big mitts. Two two-minute rounds."

McNeil refereed. The bell rang and the fighters shook hands. Coke rushed O'Keefe and landed a few light body blows. O'Keefe took them without a return. Coke backed away and circled around O'Keefe, who grinned and shuffled. Coke rushed in again and landed a left to the body followed by a right to the head, both light; but he got a stiff left in return. O'Keefe was a natural lefthander but fought with the

orthodox stance, and his straight left was a wallop. Coke looked surprised. Before the end of the round he got that left on the forehead again and it hurt. But he went to his corner grinning. Lewis leaned through the ropes.

"He certainly is careless with that left," he said.

"If he hits me hard with that left again," said Coke, "I'll hook him, and then watch."

The first part of the second round was very tame. Coke landed light blows at will and clubbed O'Keefe in the clinches, but not hard. O'Keefe grinning and shuffling, couldn't elude Coke, who locked fast compared with him. But toward the end of the round, as much through clumsiness as anything else, O'Keefe hit Coke a terrific wallop with his left. Coke went back on his heels. There was a roar from the crowd. Coke glanced at O'Keefe. O'Keefe was griming. Coke misinterpreted the grin, maneuvered him into a corner, feinted him into a right swing and lifted him off his feet with a left hook. But O'Keefe grinned. So Coke hit him with the left hook again and banged him on the jaw with a right. The grin faded.

Regan leapt through the ropes and gave Coke a push.

"Say," he said, "what you trying to do, kill this kid! He's out on his feet."

"Well," said Coke, flushing, "let him watch that left."

"I'm all right," said O'Keefe. "Boy, what a punch you got!"

"It's all over," Regan shouted to the crowd. "The champion lost his temper."

A few people in the rear booed Coke.

McNeil and Jeff took O'Keefe to his corner and worked on him. Regan stood in the center of the ring, mumbling:

"Goddam swellhead!"

"Shut up!" said Coke; "or I'll hook you one."

"Try it," said Regan, reaching toward his hip pocket where he always carried a blackjack.

Lewis jumped through the ropes and grabbed Coke from behind.

"Never mind, Coke," he said. "It was all a frame-up to make you look cheap."

Regan turned on his heel and climbed out of the ring. A fight started on the edge of the crowd and a small riot was averted by the quick thinking of Kid Halloran, who shouted:

"Police! Police!"

Coke climbed through the ropes and, glaring at the crowd, went to his dressing-room, followed by Lewis. Before he got his clothes on O'Keefe came in.

"Champ," he said, "they tell me you think I was trying to show you up. That's a lie. I just wanted to work out with you, that's all."

"All right," said Coke. "But the next time you work out with me, it'll be in The Coliseum and you'll find out how a left hook feels with a five ounce glove."

"You gonna give me a match, champ?" cried O'Keefe.

"Soon as you get a reputation," said Coke. "Now beat it."

O'Keefe stood shifting.

"What's the use of us being sore, champ," he said. "I'm for you."

"Yeah," said Coke.

"Let's shake hands," said O'Keefe.

Coke held out his hand but shook hands limply. O'Keefe looked at him for a moment, then went out.

"You're foolish if you think this was an accident, Mason," said Lewis. "It was just one of Regan's smart tricks."

"I don't know," said Coke.

As soon as he got dressed, he and Lewis went out into the gymnasium. One of the pugs took Coke by the arm.

"It takes you to do it, champ," he said.

Regan was standing at the door talking to Coon and Halloran. When Coon saw Lewis, he said goodbye to Halloran hastily and went out.

"George," Coke called.

Regan came over and glanced at Lewis, who was standing with Coke.

"Coke," said Regan, "let me give you a straight tip. Lay off these dressed up theatrical boys. They're fixing to take you."

Lewis laughed.

"What are you sore about, Regan?"

"Never mind," said Coke, cutting in. "Listen, George, did you try to frame me? If you did, all I

can say is that you're as rotten a friend as you are a manager."

"Well," said Regan, "your name's on the dotted line and you're working for me. Get the idea?"

"Sure," said Coke.

"All right," said Regan. "You get funny with me and I'll tie you up so you won't fight for a good long while."

"What did I tell you!" Lewis put in.

"You better keep out of this, you damn crook," said Regan. "I might tell some funny stories about you."

"I been expecting you to," said Lewis; " but I think Coke knows just about how much dependence to put on what you say."

"Wait a minute," said Coke. "I'm gonna do the talking. George, if you try to tie me up, I'll retire and then where'll you be. I got plenty of money. If I never fight again, I won't die in the poor house."

Regan stared at Coke, then walked away.

III

About eight o'clock one night Coke went up to Regan's room unannounced and knocked at the door. Regan let him in, but said nothing. Coke took off his overcoat and hat, and picked himself out a chair; then he took out his cigar case.

"Cigar, George?"

"Yeah, thanks," said Regan, selecting one and sitting opposite Coke.

"Well, George," said Coke, "how's things?"

"All right," said Regan. "Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, I been kind of sticking around since the wife went back on the stage," said Coke. "I'm going down to the gymnasium tomorrow."

"You better," said Regan, "and get some of that belly off."

"Yeah," said Coke.

"I bet you put on fifteen pounds."

"Yeah. I wear a sixteen and a half collar now."

"Horse collar," said Regan; "and me with a fourteen."

"Say," said Coke, "why don't you never look me up no more . . . ?"

"I don't like your gang," said Regan; "and while we're on the subject, I want to have a little talk with you."

"That's what I came down for, George."

"Yeah?" said Regan. "Well, here's the way it is, Coke. I'll be frank with you. It don't look to me like we're ever gonna get along together again."

"Aw, hell," said Coke, laughing.

"All right," said Regan; "laugh your head off. But a guy can't work for two bosses. The missus has got you roped and hogtied, and you won't listen to me no more. Now here's the thing: either I'm your manager or I'm not. As it is, I'm not. I'm just a kind of junior partner that's in the way. Get the idea? You never ask me about nothing. You never pay no attention to

what I say. All you can see is the missus and her prompter."

"What do you mean, her prompter?" Coke demanded.

"I mean Lewis," said Regan, "and a dirtier crook never lived."

"Now wait, George," said Coke. "Lewis is a good friend of mine. You think he's a crook, but I don't. So let it go at that."

"They sure got you hooked," said Regan, meditatively.

Coke sighed and sat looking at the ash on his cigar.

"Yeah," said Regan. "Just like I said. It's hopeless."

"Hell," said Coke, "to hear you talk you'd think I didn't have good sense."

"I wouldn't go that far," said Regan.

Coke got up and stood looking out the window. Regan leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"Coke," said Regan, "Cahill's ready to fight O'Keefe."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I'm going to bet two grand on O'Keefe."

"Kiss that good-bye," said Coke. "Bat'll left jab him to death."

"Maybe," said Regan, "but you ain't seen the Rattler lately. He's a hundred per cent better than when he fought Joe Savella."

"He'll have to be, unless Cahill takes it easy with him."

Regan laughed.

"The only thing that worries me about the Rattler," he said, "is his weight. He'll be a heavy some day, but I want him to make his mark in the middleweight division before he takes on weight."

"Listen, George," said Coke, "a lot of people think that if you paid more attention to me and less to O'Keefe, you'd be a lot better off. 'Tain't every guy that gets to manage a champion."

"Well," said Regan, "I'll admit I've got more breaks than a guy is entitled to. Because if anything happens to my champion, I got two more boys that'll both make a bid for it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," said Regan, "with you out of the way, who do you think can lick O'Keefe? Nobody, that's the answer. All right, that's one. Now what do you suppose would happen if Willy Strapp'd get big-hearted and give Speed a bout? Speed'd lick him. So you see, Coke, I'm fixed."

"Meaning," said Coke, "that you can get along without me, I guess; now since I made you a pile of jack. That's what the wife says. She don't think you're giving me a square deal. Neither does Lewis or Coon."

"Well, well," said Regan. "By the way, Coke, they tell me that Coon's leaving for Europe this week."

"Yeah," said Coke, "he's taking a trip around the world or something. That's one reason I come down

to see you, George. The missus and I are giving a party for him down at The Viennese. We got a private room with all the fixings. I want you to come."

"Do I have to wear a monkey-suit?"

"Well . . ."

"You said enough."

"No, George," said Coke, "you don't have to. The missus likes that kind of stuff, you know; that dressing up. But I don't, see? I just do it to please her. Look, George; all the other guys are gonna wear dress suits, but you don't need to, and I won't."

"I'm not much on parties."

"Be a sport, George."

"Well," said Regan, "I'll go."

Coke hit him on the back.

"That's good. Glad to hear it," he cried; then he looked at his watch. "Say, George, are you going any place tonight?"

"No," said Regan. "Why?"

"Let's get a taxi and go down and see the missus," said Coke. "You ain't seen her in the show yet, have you?"

"No."

"All right," said Coke; "come on. If we step on it, we'll just get there in time to see her."

"It's all right with me," said Regan.

They sat silent in the taxi; Regan smoking and Coke looking out at the traffic. It was a chilly night and a heavy fog had come in from the Atlantic. Wet

pavements shone under the white headlights. When they got to the theatre, Coke pointed to the sign.

IVOR MARTIN PRESENTS
Señor Caballero
with
Marty Wills, Ada Berger
Ann Hogarth and Rose Mason

"Pretty nice, eh, George?" Coke demanded.

"Yeah," said Regan; "but the 'Mason' don't hurt that sign none."

Coke laughed.

They were led to a box by an usher who seemed overwhelmed by the presence of the middleweight champion. They sat down. The house was dark except for the footlights; a great maroon curtain ornamented with designs in silver had just fallen; and the orchestra was playing a lazy nigger tune.

"Just in time," said Coke; "the missus does her first stunt in front of that big curtain. Ain't it a dandy? Lewis designed it."

"I didn't know he was that kind of a boy," said Regan. "Does he crochet?"

"There you go," said Coke laughing.

The orchestra reiterated the slow nigger tune, then a little cabaret piano was wheeled out on the stage by one of Rose's helpers: a slim little fellow in a Tuxedo with his face blacked up. The pianist, another blackface, was already seated at the piano playing; and Rose, in a hoop skirt, made up as a high yellow, was

perched on the top of the piano. The orchestra crashed out a series of consecutive ninths, and subsided; then the piano was heard in syncopated arpeggioes. In a somewhat husky soprano Rose began to sing a nigger blues called "Old New Orleans," and the little black boy, standing beside her, looking up at her, furnished the breaks in a highpitched, syncopated chant.

A verse and two choruses were sung, then the time was suddenly speeded up by the pianist, the orchestra joined in, and Rose, leaping down from the piano, snatched off her hoopskirt and appeared in a brassiere and tight yellow shorts. She and the little black boy began to dance, a fast syncopated nigger dance, built on the blackbottom.

"Say," said Regan, leaning over and putting his hand on Coke's shoulder, "the missus is really good."

"Sure," said Coke. "All she needed was a chance."

Toward the end of a second repetition of the chorus, the time was retarded, the orchestra subsided; Rose jumped up on the piano and was wheeled out by the little black boy, who shuffled with the music and was still taking the breaks. The act seemed so spontaneous that the audience roared for an encore; but Ivor Martin allowed no one to interfere with the pace of his Revues, so the show went on.

Marty Wills came out in an exaggerated Spanish costume and convulsed the house by tangoing with Ann Hogarth, a good clown.

"Some show," said Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke.

Rose made another appearance at the beginning of the second act. This time, supported by the two black boys, now Argentinians with baggy trousers and whips on their wrists, she danced a jazzed up version of the tango, and sang a pseudo-Spanish song in Spanish.

Coke took Regan by the arm.

"That kid can do anything," he said. "She picked up that lingo in no time."

"She's O.K.," said Regan, impressed.

Then toward the end of the show, Rose made another appearance. This time she danced and sang in front of a chorus of girls in black and rhinestone, wearing blonde wigs. The applause was long and loud, but the show went on.

At the finale the big spotlight was suddenly shifted from the stage to the box where Regan and Coke were sitting. Marty Wills stepped to the footlights and cried:

"Friends, Coke Mason, the champion."

"God, they spotted us," said Coke.

Regan, blinded by the glare, drew back into a corner, but Coke stood up and bowed to the audience.

When the show was over, Regan wanted to get a taxi and go home, but Coke led him back to the stage entrance. Coke's chauffeur had the car parked in the alleyway and was walking up and down, smoking a cigarette.

"Hello, boss," he said.

"Hello, Harry," said Coke. "Is she coming right out?"

"Yeah," said the chauffeur; "but I think she's got a load."

"That's all right," said Coke.

Regan and Coke lit cigars and stood talking. The fog had lifted; it had got cooler; and the stars were shining.

"Nice night," said Coke in a good humor. "Say, George, remember when we used to go fishing?"

"Yeah," said Regan.

"Remember when we used to take them moonlight excursions to Detroit and Put-In-Bay?"

"Yeah," said Regan.

The chauffeur stood listening. Pretty soon he said:

"You guys must've known each other for a long time."

"We sure did," said Coke. "George used to black my eye when we was kids."

"I'd like to see him do it now," said the chauffeur.

They went on talking about Lake Erie and the summer resorts. The chauffeur, who was from Clyde, Ohio, knew that part of the country himself and joined in the conversation. When Rose came out the three of them were standing smoking cigars, laughing and talking.

"Harry," called Rose, "don't you see me? Open that door."

"Yes, ma'am," said Harry, throwing away his cigar and leaping to attention.

Rose came over to Coke, nodded to Regan, and said:

"Coke, how many times do I have to tell you not to be so familiar with Harry. If you had your way he'd be eating with us. Won't you ever learn anything?"

"Aw, Rose," said Coke.

Regan stiffened.

"No, Coke," he said, "you mustn't get contaminated by the hoi polloi."

Ann Hogarth, Marty Wills, Coon and Ada Berger came out in a group, followed at a little distance by Lewis.

"Well," said Regan, "here comes your playmates, so I'm fading."

"Stick around, George," said Coke. "I'll take you home."

"Take him in a taxi, dear," said Rose. "I've got a load."

"Good Lord," said Coke; "why can't some of them other people ever bring their cars. I get sick of taxis."

"But I promised," said Rose. "We're going out to Coon's place. Everything's arranged."

"I guess I ain't invited," said Coke.

"Don't be silly," said Rose. "Get a taxi and follow us out."

"Sure," said Regan; "don't mind me. I'll get home."

Coke stood looking at the ground. Regan took his hand and shook it.

"Much oblige for the evening, kid," he said. "I'll be seeing you."

Coke nodded. Regan climbed into a taxi and slammed the door.

"You follow us, Coke," said Rose; turning, she cried: "Pile in everybody."

Coke just stood there.

"Get a cab, dear," said Rose, "so you can follow us right out."

Rose got into the car. Everybody in the car began to laugh.

"I guess you'll have to sit on my lap," cried Coon.

Lewis tried to climb in, but Rose pushed him out and said:

"Up front, Paul."

Lewis climbed in with the chauffeur. Coke stood watching them for a moment, then he went over to the car.

"Ooch over, Lewis," he said.

"There isn't much room here," said Lewis.

"Well," said Coke, "ooch over anyway."

He got in beside Lewis and the three of them sat wedged together, very uncomfortable. Nobody had anything to say.

IV

Regan took off his coat and hat, and handed them to the checkgirl. He was in evening clothes and already drunk. He took a silver dollar from his pocket and spun it on the counter.

"Heads it's yours and tails it's mine," he said.

The girl laughed. The dollar came tails.

"Tough break," said Regan putting it back in his pocket.

The headwaiter came over to him, followed by Coke, who was wearing a Tuxedo.

"Just what I thought," said Regan. "Boy, I'm too smart for you, that's all. I thought you'd cross me and put on a monkey-suit, so I rented one."

"You look fine, George," said Coke.

The headwaiter stood smiling. Finally he inquired if he should have the dinner served.

"Yeah," said Coke; "we're all set now."

Regan took the dollar out of his pocket and spun it on the counter.

"Sister," he called, "I'll give you another break."

The checkgirl watched the dollar; it came heads and she picked it up.

"All right," said Regan; "it's yours. I could hold out for two out of three, but I won't. Coke, old boy, if you don't look like a straight man in a burlesque show, I'll pay your way to Alaska."

"This collar's sawing my neck," said Coke.

Regan followed Coke back through the crowded nightclub into a big private room beyond. Ada Berger, Ann Hogarth, Marty Wills and his wife, Coon, Rose and Lewis were all seated at a big, round table. Regan sat down beside Ada Berger and immediately began to talk to her.

"I suppose you all know my manager George Regan," said Coke.

"What does it matter!" cried Regan, taking a silver flask out of his pocket and offering it to Ada.

"I can't take mine straight," said Ada.

"How come I picked you out!" said Regan.

"I'll take a drink, George," said Rose.

Regan got up and went to sit beside her. She drank from his flask, and when the jazzband began to play, he brushed aside Coon and Lewis, who both wanted to dance with her, and led her out to the dance floor. The rest of them paired off gradually. Coke, pleased by the way Regan was acting, sat alone with his stein of beer. A waiter entered with the soup.

"Left you all by yourself, did they, champ?" said the waiter.

"Yeah," said Coke, smiling. "I'd rather drink beer anyway."

"Don't blame you," said the waiter. "I see 'em dancing every night and I often wonder what they do it for. I don't see no fun in shoving each other around in a mob like that. If they had to earn their living that way they'd put up an awful howl."

"Yeah," said Coke. "I'd rather swap punches any day."

"Sure you would," said the waiter; "and I'd rather swing a tray."

Coke took out a cigar and gave it to the waiter.

"I'll see you when we bust up," he said.

"O.K.," said the waiter.

He went out.

At the end of the first encore, they all came back to eat their soup, Regan and Rose arm in arm. Lewis was with Ada Berger, Coon with Mrs. Wills, and Marty with Ann Hogarth.

Two waiters came in carrying the champagne and everybody stood up and cheered. As soon as the cham-

pagne was poured, Lewis got up with his glass and said:

"Folks, let's all drink a little toast to the greatest fighter in the business, Mr. Coke Mason."

The toast was drunk and Coke bowed and shouted: "Thanks! Thanks!"

Regan got up and waved his flask.

" 'Tain't right, folks. You hear me! Ladies first is what I say. So just forget you've drunk that one and we'll start off with a toast to one of the hottest little hoofers on Broadway. A small town girl who made good. Rose Mason."

There was a prolonged clamor.

"Good for you, George," cried Coke.

The soup was eaten and the first round of champagne consumed; then there was a rush for the dance floor, and again Coke was left alone. The friendly waiter came in with another stein for Coke. He drank it thoughtfully. Then two waiters came in with the second course, and in a moment were followed by the party. Regan and Rose were still arm in arm, and Lewis, ignoring his partner, was trying to get a word with Rose. They all sat down, more champagne was brought in, and Coke got to his feet and said:

"Folks, before you get too soused to know what I'm talking about, I want to tell you that we have with us tonight a man you all know, who is going away on a long trip and won't be back for six months. Mr. Harold Coon."

"Speech! Speech! Speech!" yelled Marty Wills.

Coon got uncertainly to his feet.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to interrupt this nice party by holding forth at length, but I do want to say that I'm sorry to leave you all and certainly hope that when I come back you'll all be as glad to see me as I am to see you. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't go at all if my doctor hadn't insisted. He thinks ocean air will be good for me, also a change of regimen; what ever that is. I'm quoting him. He says I drink too much, eat too much, sleep too much, and there are other accusations I won't bother you with. . . ."

He was drowned out by shouts of laughter, and Ada Berger pulled him back into his seat. In the club proper the jazzband began to play and in a moment one of the entertainers came into the room and stood beside Coke, singing to him. At the conclusion of her song, she kissed him on the forehead and ran out. Coke jumped up and ran after her with a five dollar bill in his hand.

"Look at that," shouted Regan. "And right in front of his wife."

"That's all right," said Rose. "It looks bad, I'll admit. But you know Coke."

"His intentions are pure," said Ann Hogarth. "He's the only decent man I ever met in my life."

"That's an insult," cried Regan; then he pulled out his flask and drank from it. "You met me, didn't you? Well, you still got your virginity as far as I'm concerned."

"Whoa!" said Lewis.

They all stared at Regan.

"What's the matter?" Regan demanded. "Didn't none of you ever hear that word before?" He stared at them. "Maybe not," he concluded.

Coke came back, grinning.

"I had to chase her all over hell and back," he said.

"Did you force the nasty money on her?" asked Regan.

"Yeah," said Coke; "but the manager says I shouldn't do it no more."

"He wants a cut himself," said Regan.

Lewis pushed himself between Regan and Rose, and asked her to dance with him.

"I'm dancing with Harold this time," she said.

Regan laughed and gave Lewis a shove.

"Be patient," he said; "your turn'll come. You'll have almost a clear field after tonight."

"Hey, George," called Coke, noticing the expression on Lewis's face; "not so rough."

Lewis got very pale and stood staring at Regan.

"Yes," said Lewis; "try to act like a gentleman."

Regan took Lewis by the lapels, put his face close to Lewis's and whispered:

"Don't try to kid me, big boy. You can kid the mister all you please, but don't try to kid me."

Lewis jerked away and asked Ada Berger to dance with him. Rose and Coon went out, followed by Marty Wills and his wife. Ann Hogarth went to sit beside Coke, who was drinking another big stein. Regan emptied his flask and put it back in his pocket.

"Want to dance with me, baby?" he said.

"No, thanks," said Ann. "Me and the champ here are going to sit this one out."

She ran her fingers through Coke's hair and patted his cheek.

"Well," said Regan, getting up, "I think I'll go out and see a gentleman friend. That champagne sure does go through you."

Coke laughed, but checked himself when he saw the expression on Ann's face. Regan went out.

"What's wrong, honey?" Coke inquired.

"I don't like that man," she said, pouting.

"Aw, he's all right," said Coke. "Just kind of rough, but he's got a good heart."

"I wish he wouldn't talk like he does," said Ann. "He embarrasses me."

Ann was small and slender and childish-looking. Her hair was cut short, a crock-cut Coke's father would have said, and in certain attitudes she didn't look over thirteen years old. She made Coke feel very protective and masculine.

"Well," said Coke, "he didn't mean nothing by the way he talks. It's just his way."

"Uh hunh," said Ann, pouting. Then she pointed to his stein. "Give baby drink."

Coke tipped the stein up for her and roared with laughter when she emerged from it with foam on her eyelashes.

"Boy, you sure took a high dive," he said.

Ann put her head on Coke's shoulder.

"I like beer," she said. "My mama says beer is vulgar, but I like it. I like corned beef, too, and I like cabbage. I'm so vulgar."

"Hell," said Coke, "that's real food."

"Mama likes croquettes," said Ann, "and duck and avacadoes and all that stuff you're supposed to like, but I don't. Mama used to like corned beef when we had a kitchenette in the Bronx. But that was before I got going. Now it takes half of what I make to feed her."

"That's the way it goes," said Coke. "That's the way Rose is, sort of."

He tipped up his stein and emptied it.

"You know," said Ann, "you and Rose are just an ideal couple. You both got your own work and you seem to get along so good. Gee, I wish I could find a man like you."

"Aw!" said Coke, embarrassed.

Ann ran her fingers through his hair.

"Did you know I went to see you fight for the championship?" she inquired.

"Did you?"

"I sure did. And when that little mick had you on the floor I jumped up and yelled, 'Stop that! Stop that!' and mama like to killed me."

Coke burst out laughing.

"That was before I ever knew you," she said.

"Yeah," said Coke; "that's right."

Regan came in followed, almost immediately, by the rest of the party. Rose stopped in the doorway when

she saw Ann sitting with her head on Coke's shoulder.

"Well," she said, "ain't that cute!"

Coke grinned and Ann sat up.

"Atta boy, Coke," cried Regan, who was quite drunk now. "Give 'em what they send, kid."

"Say," said Lewis, sharply, "wouldn't it be a good idea for you to go home and go to bed? You're drunk!"

Regan turned, stared at Lewis for a moment, then without a word, he took a blackjack from his hip-pocket and struck at Lewis, who, white as chalk, ran out of the room. Regan started after him, but Coke, leaping from his chair, seized him from behind and held him.

"My God, George," he said, "where do you think you're at?"

"You wouldn't listen to me, would you!" said Rose. "I told you you couldn't invite that dirty mick with decent people."

Regan's face was red and congested. He shook Coke off, put his blackjack away, and said:

"Listen, blondy; when I came up here I made up my mind to be nice to you, but it can't be done, see, it can't be done. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, pulling the stuff you do, and then raising hell with Coke because a little kid sits with her head on his shoulder. If I was him, I'd have her out in the back room."

"Oh, would you!" cried Ann. "Coke are you gonna stand for that?"

"Yeah," said Rose. "You're a fine man!"

Coon and Ada Berger slipped out the door unnoticed, followed by Marty Wills and his wife.

"You're damn right he's gonna stand for it," said Regan. "There ain't a guy in the world that can keep me from saying my piece, when I start to say it."

Coke stood staring at Regan, not knowing what to do.

"Yeah," said Regan, "all you damn hypocrites get all excited when I say a naughty word, but there ain't one of you decent enough to appreciate a good guy when you see one. I mean Coke. He's a damn dummy and all that, but he's straight and that's more than I can say for any of the rest of you. This little kid here with all her nicey-nice talk; this cute little Ann Hogarth. Why don't somebody ask her who got her a chance in Martin's show. I'll tell you. A guy seventy years old, and he ain't her grandpa!"

Ann put her hands over her face and began to cry.

"George," Coke implored.

"Yeah," said Regan, "and who put you in the show for that matter, blondy?"

"Coke," cried Rose, "are you gonna let that dirty pool-room bum insult me?"

"George, cut it out," said Coke, flushing.

"You're gonna listen," said Regan. "I'm done with the whole damn bunch of you, see? So you're gonna listen. Yeah, blondy, why don't you speak up and tell the mister who put you in the show? Lewis put her in, Coke. You heard me. Lewis put her in the show, and

his own wife knew what was going on and left him. If you don't believe me, write and ask her."

"Coke," said Rose, "hear what he's saying about me?"

"Take it back, George," said Coke. "You can't talk about my wife like that."

Regan laughed. Coke's biceps swelled under his coat and tears started from his eyes.

"Sock him, Coke," said Rose. "You gonna stand there and let him call me a whore?"

Regan saw Coke coming and reached for his blackjack, but too late. Coke sent a swift, hard right to the side of his head and followed it with a left to the body. Regan was flung back against the wall.

"Sock him again, Coke," cried Rose, screaming with excitement.

But Ann grabbed Coke's arm.

"That's enough! That's enough!" she cried.

Coke stood with his hands at his side, staring at Regan, who leaned against the wall for a moment, then slid to the floor.

"Let's go, Coke," said Rose. "The party's all busted up now."

"Yeah," said Ann. "Let's go."

They tried to drag Coke out, but he shook them off, went over to Regan, picked him up and carried him to a chair. Regan put both his hands on the table and sat staring into space, groggy.

"George," said Coke, "I had to do it. I couldn't stand for you shooting off your mouth that way."

"Get out of here and leave me alone," said Regan.

Coke stared at Regan, then turned and went out followed by Ann and Rose. Coon, Ada Berger and Mr. and Mrs. Wills were waiting at the check-room. Lewis was downstairs in the car. No one in the club proper knew that anything had happened.

Coke put on his coat and hat, tipped the checkgirls and the waiters, then he went to find the headwaiter, who was totaling up the bill. The headwaiter presented the bill and Coke paid it. Then he said:

"Mr. Regan is still back in the room. He ain't feeling so good, so he don't want to go along with us. If he wants anything give it to him and charge it to me."

"Yes sir," said the headwaiter. "Good night, Mr. Mason."

V

Lewis, Rose and Coke sat waiting for Regan, who had telephoned that he'd be down to see Coke on important business, to have Lewis there. Coke was puzzled; Lewis uneasy. But Rose was calm and sat smoking and humming to herself. Lewis had just been reading aloud some of her press notices; they were uniformly favorable.

"Mighty nice," said Coke. "I always said all you needed was a chance."

"Yes," said Lewis; "that's all she needed."

"Well," said Rose to Coke, "you held out long enough."

"I didn't want you working," said Coke.

"I know just how you feel," said Lewis. "My wife insists on working, too. It makes you feel like you aren't man enough to do the right thing, you know. I mean a man feels like he ought to support his wife."

"Yeah," said Coke; "but since Rose is doing so well and having so much fun, why, I kind of feel different about it."

"That's only natural," said Lewis.

"Yeah," said Coke; "but I don't see her much. That's the thing I don't like about it."

"The less you see of me," said Rose, "the more you'll enjoy seeing me when you do."

"That's a fact," said Lewis.

"I don't know," said Coke.

They sat in silence. Pretty soon the telephone rang. Coke answered it. It was the clerk; he told Coke that Regan and another man were on their way up.

"Coke," said Lewis, "maybe I better go in the bedroom. I don't want any trouble with Regan. He was just drunk, that's all. But you know him! He holds a grudge."

"Hell," said Coke; "you leave me handle him."

"Sure," said Rose, laughing. "He won't bite you, Paul."

Lewis flushed and stared at Rose.

There was a knock at the door and Coke opened it. Regan came in followed by McNeil. Regan was pale and there was a purplish bruise on his right cheekbone. McNeil didn't look at Coke, but took off his cap and stood twisting it.

"Sit down, you guys," said Coke. "Want a drink?"

"No," said Regan. "Don't bother trying to be friendly. I don't feel friendly. This is just a matter of business, that's all; and the sooner we get it over with the better."

"That goes for me," said McNeil.

They sat down.

"Well," said Coke, "let's have it then, if that's the way you feel about it."

"All right," said Regan. He took a document out of his pocket and showed it to Coke. "There's the contract you signed to fight for me, Coke, and it's got a year to run. According to some of the clauses in it, that you were too dumb to understand, you got to fight who I tell you, when I tell you."

"You dummy," said Rose; "signing a contract like that!"

"Just a minute," said Regan. "Now, Coke, we're through, see? I'm done with you for good. I knew just as soon as you found the missus again that we was through. I did the best I could, but let that pass. The point is, we're done. According to this contract, I could tie you up for a year. Of course you could cross me by retiring, like you said. Well, you don't have to. I'm gonna tear this contract up."

"Fair enough," said Lewis.

"Just a minute," said Regan. "But I ain't gonna tear this contract up just for fun. That ain't my way and that ain't business. I've spent a lot of time on you, Coke, making a champion out of you, and I figure I

got something coming. Well, all you got to do is sign a little paper I got here and you're free."

He took the paper from his pocket and handed it to Lewis.

"Let me see that," said Coke.

"Let Lewis read it," said Regan. "He'll probably be your next manager and he might just as well get in on the ground floor."

Coke sat staring at the wall, avoiding Regan's eyes. Lewis read the paper, then said:

"This sounds O.K. to me, Coke. All you got to do is agree to give O'Keefe a shot at the championship within four months."

"Providing he licks Cahill," McNeil put in.

"That's a mere detail," said Lewis. "Regan'll see to that with a championship go at stake."

"I don't have to fix no fights for O'Keefe," said Regan. "He fixes them with lefts."

"Is it all O.K., Paul?" Rose inquired.

"Yes," said Lewis, "except this twenty-five per cent gate. That'll have to be settled later."

"Let it stand," said Coke.

"But good Lord, champ," said Lewis, "O'Keefe's lucky you're giving him a match at all."

"We won't fight about that," said Regan. "We can settle that later."

"I should think so," said Rose.

"We'll scratch that out then," said Lewis.

"Tim Morgan's willing to make you a record guarantee for the match, Coke," said Regan.

"All right with me," said Coke.

Lewis scratched out the clause dealing with the gate guarantee and Coke signed the paper. Then Regan took the old contract Coke had signed and tore it up.

"Now," said Regan, "we're all set except I want to see your duplicate torn up."

"I don't even know where it is," said Coke, scratching his head.

"I got it," said Rose.

She unlocked a drawer in the writing-desk and took out the contract. Coke took it from her and tore it up.

"Well, that's that," said Regan.

He got to his feet and so did McNeil.

"Going with George, are you, Mac?" Coke inquired.

"Yeah," said Mac. "I ain't got no use for people that go back on their friends."

Coke didn't say anything. Regan and McNeil went out.

"Well," said Rose, "I'm sure glad to see the last of George Regan."

"Yes," said Lewis; "he's a bad one."

"He's bossed Coke around since Coke was a kid," said Rose.

Coke went into the bedroom and shut the door.

VI

Lewis and Coke came in just as the main-go was starting. O'Keefe was lumbering around with his left stuck out as far as it would go, and Cahill, with his

hands at his sides, was trying to draw him. Coke saw Regan at the ringside, but Regan avoided his eyes.

"O'Keefe'll lick him" said Coke. "Cahill's as thick as ten in a bed with Regan."

"Certainly," said Lewis. "It's all set."

The first round was slow, both fighters cautious, and when the bell rang somebody shouted: "Wait till Coke Mason starts socking you, Red Head!" This started a laugh and quite a few people at ringside turned to look for the speaker. A man behind Coke leaned forward and patted him on the back.

"You can lick 'em both, Coke," said the man.

"I have," said Coke.

At the beginning of the second round Cahill leapt out of his corner and began to hammer O'Keefe with body punches, some of which looked low. The referee warned him. O'Keefe stalled around, occasionally landing a long-range left, but Cahill was all over him, hitting him with body punches which he ripped up from his knees. O'Keefe grinned and stalled and shot out his long left. Once he caught Cahill coming in with that left, and Cahill went back on his heels. At the end of the round Cahill had a cut over his left eye, and O'Keefe's body looked as if it had been beaten with a paddle.

"Well," said Lewis, "O'Keefe better wake up if he's gonna win this fight."

"Yeah," said Coke; "that was Bat's round all right."

Coke itched to be in the ring.

The third and fourth rounds were Cahill's. He was landing body blows at will, and O'Keefe, who seemed very much puzzled by his attack, kept missing rights. Once or twice he shot out his left and landed. Once a glancing left sent Cahill into the ropes, but he leapt in immediately and drove O'Keefe across the ring with short jolts to the body. O'Keefe clinched.

"You know, Paul," said Coke, "I think this fight is straight. I know just what O'Keefe's up against. Bat's hell when he's in close."

"Maybe you're right," said Lewis. "But I thought Regan had more sense than to take a chance on this fight. Cahill's no cinch for anybody."

Coke glanced at Regan, who sat chewing on a cold cigar. He seemed calm enough. But in the ring, while Jeff worked over O'Keefe, McNeil was talking to him. From time to time O'Keefe nodded.

At the beginning of the fifth round Cahill used his usual tactics, rushing in immediately to get at O'Keefe's body and offset his long left, but this time, the left, a hard wallop, met him coming in. O'Keefe had shot it at a slightly different angle and connected. Cahill was thrown off balance, and before he could get back on his stride, O'Keefe hit him with a right followed by another left, good solid punches. Cahill went down. It was a clean knockdown, but Cahill wasn't groggy, and the count of nine he leapt to his feet and weathered a terrific fusilade of punches. Then suddenly he landed a hard right to the body. O'Keefe

arched his body as if it had stung him, but he didn't back up and continued his attack. Seeing that he had hurt his opponent, Cahill opened up and stood toe to toe slugging with O'Keefe. Toward the end of the round, Cahill, ripping his body punches up from his knees, fouled O'Keefe and O'Keefe fell to the floor, writhing.

"Hell," said Coke.

"Foul sure enough," said Lewis.

Cahill stood in the middle of the ring, shaking his head from side to side. O'Keefe was carried to his corner.

The fight was awarded to O'Keefe on a foul. The crowd was disgusted. They booed and stamped. Someone started the story that Cahill had fouled O'Keefe on purpose, that he was sore at him. Someone else said that O'Keefe hadn't been fouled at all, that it was just a stall so he would be sure to get his match with the champion. Regan, known as a slicker, was accused of all sorts of things.

Coke and Lewis went back to see Cahill. Cahill was lying on the rubbing-table.

"Too bad, Bat," said Coke.

"Yeah," said Bat. "That's the only fight I ever lost on a foul."

"Tough," said Coke.

"Yeah," said Bat. "He crowded me just as I was pulling one up. He ran right into it. It was a foul all right."

Bat's trainer started to work on him.

"He ain't hard to hit, champ," said Bat. "But watch that left. Boy, what a wallop."

"He's a natural lefthander," said Coke.

"Well," said Lewis, "he won't cause you much trouble."

"No," said Coke.

PART VII

I

Coke had just got out of bed. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. He put on a bathrobe and went into the bathroom to shave. Rose came in with a stack of letters.

"Look," she said, holding out one of the letters, "from Calcutta."

"Calcutta!" Coke exclaimed. "Who the hell's he?"

"Oh, Lord," said Rose, laughing. "It ain't a he; it's a town away over in Europe some place. Haven't you ever heard of Calcutta?"

"I don't remember," said Coke. "Is it from Coon?"

"Yeah," said Rose.

"Did you read it yet?"

"No," said Rose. "It's yours."

"Mine!" said Coke. "Well, that's mighty nice of old Coon to remember me that way."

He took the letter, tore it open and started to read it. Then he shrugged his shoulders and handed it to Rose.

"He writes funny," he said. "Anyway, what does he want to tell me all about them places for. I ain't got no interest in foreign countries."

"Well, you ought to have," said Rose. "Everybody that is anybody travels."

"Hell," said Coke, "ain't I traveled? I been every

place from Frisco to New York and from New Orleans to Detroit."

"That don't count," said Rose. "Nobody travels in America. When you travel, you ought to travel in Europe."

"How come?"

"Because," said Rose, and she went on reading Coon's letter.

"Well," said Coke, "I notice one thing. Them foreigners are mighty glad to get over here. Yeah, they come by the boatload. If Europe's such a hell of a place why don't they stay there . . . ?"

"Don't bother me," said Rose. "I'm reading."

"Yeah," said Coke; "that's what I want to know. One time I asked Speed De Angelo why his old man left Italy and he said 'to make money.' Try and get Speed to go back to Italy. Yeah, he'd give you the horse-laugh."

"Don't talk so ignorant," said Rose.

Coke lathered his face and began to shave. Rose sat on the edge of the bathtub and went on reading.

"Gee, Coke," said Rose, "Harold says he nearly got mobbed in Calcutta because he went in some place where he wasn't supposed to go. Gee, this is exciting."

"I'd like to see some of them foreigners mob me," said Coke.

II

Coke was lonesome. He sat at the window looking down into the street. He had tried to read. He had

even stripped off his clothes and shadow-boxed for three minutes, following this with a shower and a good rubdown. But it didn't help any. He felt stale and tired and lonesome, and sat staring down at the unending procession of cars in the street. When the clock struck eight, he got up, put on his Tuxedo, and went out.

It was the beginning of May, but a cold March wind was sweeping up the street. Coke walked for a block or two, but, changing his mind, got into a taxi and instructed the driver to take him to the Ivor Martin Theatre.

He got in just as the big maroon curtain was descending. The piano was wheeled out by the dapper little black boy; the orchestra played its series of consecutive ninths and subsided; the piano was heard in syncopated arpeggioes; then Rose began to sing her song about New Orleans, the little black boy taking the breaks. The orchestra began to play, the time was speeded up, and Rose leapt down, snatching off her hoopskirt, and began to dance, accompanied by the dapper little black boy. When the act was over, Coke went backstage to see Rose. She was in her dressing-room with her negro maid.

"Well," said Rose, "here's papa."

"Yeah," said Coke. "I got lonesome."

"I thought you was going to bed early tonight," said Rose, shaking her finger at him; "you got to begin to get yourself in shape."

"Yeah, I know," said Coke. "But I just kind of got lonesome."

"That's all right," said Rose; "but you got to start taking hold of yourself, Coke. Mama spank."

"I wish to God you'd give up this damn show business, so I could get settled down," said Coke.

"Naughty, naughty," said Rose. "Mustn't interfere with mama."

Coke sat looking at the floor. Someone knocked and the maid opened the door. It was Lewis. When he saw Coke a shadow of annoyance crossed his face; then he smiled and drew back.

"Didn't know you were here, champ," he said. "I won't bother you. I just wanted to see Rose about a bit of business for our new show."

"Come on in, Paul," said Rose. "You're not bothering anybody."

But Coke didn't say anything, so Lewis said:

"No. There's no hurry about this. It can wait. See you later on."

He went out.

"Say," said Coke, "get your dress on and lets go over to Mike's and get a stein of beer between the acts."

"All right," said Rose.

Mike's was in the alley straight across from the stage entrance of the theatre. When Coke and Rose came in there was a crowd around the bar and somebody said:

"There's Coke Mason."

Coke shook all the hands shoved at him and guided

Rose to a stall in the rear, where they wouldn't be bothered. A waiter brought them two big steins. They drank in silence.

"Looking mighty sweet tonight," said Coke, finally.

"Yeah," said Rose; "I feel pretty good. I'm beginning to get my strength back. I sure had the flu like nobody else."

"I never have nothing," said Coke. "I never been sick in my life."

"Brute," said Rose.

"Well," said Coke, "I always took pretty good care of myself."

"It's a wonder," said Rose, "associating with that no-account George Regan."

Coke stared at his stein.

"Yeah," said Rose; "it's a wonder you haven't got the D. T's and other things."

Coke said nothing. Rose took a mirror out of her handbag and began to rearrange her hair. Coke ordered two more steins.

"Rose," he said, "I think I'll stick around and wait for you, tonight. I don't feel like sleeping."

"But I'm not going home after the show," said Rose. "We're all going out to Ivor Martin's."

"Well," said Coke, "can't I go?"

"No," said Rose; "it's just for the people in the show. It'll be a nice party. Mrs. Martin's gonna be there."

"Damn funny I can't go," said Coke, sulking.

"Well," said Rose, "Mrs. Wills isn't going, and neither is Ada Berger's boy-friend; you know, the one she says is going to marry her."

Coke emptied his second stein, and leaned back in his seat, looking at Rose.

"I bet Lewis is going," he said.

"I don't know whether he is or not," said Rose. "I haven't talked to him for a couple of days."

"I bet he is."

Rose thought for a moment, then she said:

"Coke, I got a good one to tell you about Lewis. But you got to promise not to say anything. Promise?"

"Sure."

"Don't kid me now, because Lewis would be sore at me if he knew I told you."

"All right," said Coke; "I won't say nothing."

"Well," said Rose; "he's in love with some married woman, and she's got him down good and plenty. I don't know who she is yet, but I've got my suspicions."

Coke smiled, relieved.

"Ain't that good!" said Rose, laughing. "The other day down at the theatre when we was rehearsing a new gag for the last act, he got so absent-minded he started to walk around the stage and fell over a chair. Did we laugh!"

Coke leaned back in his chair and roared. Lewis was always so dignified. The picture of him falling over a chair made Coke laugh.

"Yeah," said Rose; "I'm not telling anybody what I think, see? But I got my suspicions."

"Tell me," said Coke.

"Cross your heart and hope to die you won't tell?"

"Hell," said Coke, "I don't go around blabbing things."

"All right," said Rose. "I think it's Mrs. Wills."

"What!" cried Coke. "Why, she seems like such a nice little woman."

"You can't never tell," said Rose.

"No," said Coke; "that's a fact."

"That's why I don't know whether he'll be at the party or not. Marty's going but Mrs. Wills isn't, see? So my guess is, that he won't."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Coke.

Rose glanced at her wrist-watch.

"We better be going, Coke," she said.

They got up and Coke went over to pay his bill.

"On the house, champ," said Mike. "Your money ain't no good in here."

"All right," said Coke; "if that's the way you feel about it. But I'm gonna bring you down two ringside seats for the big match."

"Thank you, champ," said Mike. "I'll be there pulling for you."

Coke shook hands with a new bunch of Mike's patrons, then he and Rose went out. Mike put his elbows on the counter and whispered to one of his patrons.

"The champ's O.K.," he said, "but that wife of his ain't worth the powder to blow her up. Damn near every night she's in here with that dressed-up manager of Coke's."

"That ain't none of our business, Mike," said the man.

"No," said Mike; "but I like to see a guy like him get a straight deal."

"Well," said the man, "you don't know the inside, Mike, so you better keep out of it."

"I'm keeping out," said Mike.

Rose stopped at the stage entrance, put her arms around Coke, and kissed him.

"Better run on home, honey," she said, "and get a good sleep."

"Yeah," said Coke; "I guess I better."

"Don't worry about mama," she said. "I'll probably come home with Marty Wills and you know he's O.K."

"Yeah," said Coke, "Marty's O.K. But somebody ought to tell him about Lewis. That ain't no way to do." He stood thinking, then he laughed and went on: "But it's funny all the same."

"Well," said Rose, "it's none of our business."

"No," said Coke; "that's a fact."

"I'm going, honey," she said. "I got to get dressed."

"All right," said Coke, kissing her. "Good-bye, baby. Don't stay too late."

When she had gone, he stood in the alley for a little while, looking at the ground, then he climbed into a taxi. Sitting with Rose in Mike's had made him feel better, but now that she was gone the old feeling of loneliness returned. He sat looking out at the rows of brilliantly-lighted shops, hardly seeing them. The

wind was still blowing strong and now a mist had begun to cloud the windows.

"Ain't much like summer," said Coke, sighing.

He didn't want to go home. Reading didn't interest him; he was sick of the radio; and he didn't feel like sleeping. What could he do? He'd get out and walk. He ordered the taxi-driver to draw up at the curb, and he got out. The taxi-driver looked at him suspiciously, then he grinned, recognizing him.

"Hello, champ," he said.

"Hello," said Coke, giving him a big tip. "I just kind of thought I'd better walk and get some of this belly off of me."

"That's O.K.," said the driver, "if it don't blow up a rain. Gonna walk straight out this way? I can keep an eye on you if you are."

"No," said Coke, "that's all right. I don't mind a little rain."

"Good-night, champ," said the driver, getting back into his seat.

"So long," said Coke.

Before Coke had gone two blocks it began to drizzle. He turned up the collar of his topcoat and leaned against the wind. The exercise made him feel better, but he was still lonesome.

"Funny!" he thought. "When I didn't have Rose I figured if I could find her, I'd never be lonesome no more. Funny! Yeah, and when I was a kid I thought if I could ever be champion I'd be the happiest guy on earth. Funny, how things are!"

It began to rain, slowly at first, big drops which splattered on the pavement; then more heavily, hissing and splashing, and filling the gutters. The wind caught up the rain and flung it in Coke's face. He swore at himself for being such a fool and made for a cafe, whose sign was reflected upside down on the wet pavement.

A one-legged beggar was crouched in the entryway. His coat was soaked with rain and water dripped from his battered hat.

"Buy a pencil mister," he said.

Coke studied him.

"Hell of a night, ain't it?" he said.

The beggar looked up at him.

"I been out in worse than this."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," said the beggar; "I been out on winter nights when the snot froze on your nose."

Coke rubbed his chin and looked at him. Then he took out his billfold and gave him a five dollar bill. The man looked up at him.

"That's a five, kid," he said.

"I know," said Coke.

"Ever been on the rocks yourself?" asked the beggar, putting away the money.

"Sure," said Coke. "I've hit the grit."

"Well," said the beggar, "them's the kind of guys that knows what it means to be hungry. They ain't got no strings on their pocketbooks, when they got pocketbooks."

"You said a mouthful," said Coke.

A waiter glanced out of the window of the cafe, then opened the door and came out.

"Say," he said to the beggar, "you want me to call a cop! What you mean bothering our patrons. You get the hell out of here and be quick about it."

The beggar shrugged and pulled himself up on his crutch.

"Say," said Coke to the waiter, "it's raining cats and dogs out there. Give the guy a break."

The beggar laughed.

"Hell," he said; "I'm used to this."

"Yeah," said the waiter, "you damn bums are all alike. Every time it rains we got to kick one of you bums out of this entryway."

"I'm going," said the beggar.

He put his box of pencils into his pocket and hobbled out into the rain.

"So long," said Coke.

"So long," said the beggar.

The waiter held the door open for Coke, smiling. "Step right in, sir."

Coke was ushered to a table near the orchestra and the headwaiter came over to him.

"Excuse me," he said; "but aren't you Mr. Mason?"

"Yeah," said Coke.

"Well," said the headwaiter, "We're certainly glad to see you here, sir. If you don't get the proper attention from your waiter please tell me."

He bowed and went away. Then the waiter who

had ejected the beggar came to wait on Coke.

"You handle them guys pretty rough, don't you?" said Coke.

"Well," said the waiter, "we got our orders. If we let 'em alone they wouldn't give us no peace. They'd hurt the business. Personally I don't care. But people don't like to be bothered with beggars when they're out for a good time."

The waiter took Coke's order and went away. Coke sat drumming on the table, listening to the braying of the trombone and the moaning of the saxophone. He watched the dancers in the little roped-off dance floor.

"Funny," he said.

III

ALTHOUGH Lewis had signed to manage Coke, he paid very little attention to him. In the first place he was busy with the show business; in the second place he didn't know a great deal about the fight game and figured that a champion ought to be able to look after himself. But he was interested in one side of it; he looked after the money. He saw that Coke gave proper testimonials to various manufacturers of nostrums, bargained for hours with advertising men, and in general made Coke's position as champion a very lucrative one. Where money was concerned he was hard as iron. In spite of his dignity, he could drive a

shrewd bargain, and many men who visited him with the idea of robbing him, came away feeling that they had got the worst of it. But outside of that, he wasn't much help to Coke.

Coke had no very deep feeling of friendship for Lewis. Lewis wasn't his kind. There was something distant about him, something withdrawn, even when he was laughing and seemingly all attention. He just didn't mix. As far as Coke knew, Lewis hadn't a close friend in the world. He seemed stiff and formal to Coke even when they had their coats off, drinking beer. He couldn't unbend. With strangers he was silent and dignified. With people he knew he was affable, but even to Coke the affability seemed forced. Sometimes Coke would sit and look at him, noting the clear, pale complexion, the carefully-kept black sideburns, the long womanish eyelashes. Lewis talked without gestures and without opening his lips very far. He stared intently at you with his pale eyes while he was talking, but when you talked, he looked away, avoiding your eyes. Often Coke felt uncomfortable with Lewis, but he didn't know why. Rose said that Lewis was very "refined" and came from a very "old" family. Coke turned this over in his mind and eventually came to the conclusion that that was the reason he felt slightly uneasy with Lewis. Lewis was educated and refined; he wasn't.

Coke's loneliness increased. Trying to get himself into some kind of shape before he started his actual

training, he got up at six o'clock, walked, skipped the rope, and took various exercises; at ten o'clock he was in bed. This schedule exactly suited Rose and when she talked with Coke, seldom now, she was careful to praise him for his self-discipline and to assure him that only a man of very strong character could make such an abrupt change in his way of living. Coke was pleased when Rose praised him, but the pleasure didn't last, and as soon as he was by himself again he was as unhappy as before. Often, in spite of the promises he had made, he would beg Rose to leave the stage and just stay with him and help him out. But Rose would tell him that he wasn't keeping his promises, was acting like a kid, and in a few minutes had him feeling ashamed of himself.

Coke fell back on Jeff. Rose was rehearsing a new show and was away from home most every afternoon. As soon as she was gone, Coke would call Jeff up and have him come over, or else he would take a taxi and go after Jeff. Jeff helped him train and they went to shows together. But even Jeff had changed. He was less talkative than he had ever been and he never seemed to understand what Coke was saying, unless they were talking "fight." Sometimes he would say:

"You talk funny, Coke."

Coke would stare at him, not knowing that his contact with Lewis and Rose, his semi-isolation from his old friends had made a deep impression on him, modified his mode of thought; and he was also unable to understand that his loneliness had made him think,

had made him discover things about himself and the world that had never occurred to him before. Jeff seemed stupider than he used to be.

A week before the start of the actual training, Coke sent a telegram to Jimmy Pappas, the Greek middleweight wrestler, who used to train with him when he was a palooka in Sandusky, Ohio, and asked him to come to New York to act as assistant trainer. The newspapers made quite a story of it, a human interest story. Jimmy accepted the offer.

A few nights before Coke was to leave for Ash Harbor, Long Island, where he was to train, he woke from a sound sleep, laughing, and sat up. Rose heard him, climbed out of her bed, and shook him.

"What's wrong with you, Coke?" she demanded.

"Wrong with who?" said Coke, befuddled. "I'm all right."

"Why ain't you sleeping?" said Rose. "You know you got to get back in shape."

She was afraid he had heard her come in.

"I been sleeping," said Coke. "What time is it?"

"About four o'clock," said Rose.

"You just getting in?"

"Lord, no. I been in since one o'clock, or maybe a little later. What were you laughing at? You been laying awake . . . ?"

"No," said Coke, "I been sleeping like a log. I come to bed at ten-thirty. I guess I was dreaming. Climb in here with me."

Rose leaned across the bed and kissed him.

"No, honey," she said, "mama's got a bad headache."

Coke didn't say anything.

"Yeah," said Rose, "I think I'll go take some of my pills."

"You always got something the matter with you," said Coke.

"Well, I like that!" said Rose switching on the lamp. "That's a fine way for you to talk. You know I ain't never got over that flu yet."

"That's all right," said Coke. "But every time I want you to be nice to me, you got a headache or something."

"I can't help it, Coke," said Rose. "You better get yourself another girl."

"Aw, hell!" said Coke, lying down and settling himself for sleep.

"Besides," said Rose, "you're in training, or ought to be."

"That's all I hear from morning till night," said Coke. "If it ain't you, it's Lewis. I'm getting sick of it."

"Now, now," said Rose. "You know you always get all upset when you're training. All the real fighters do."

Coke snorted and turned over irritably.

"I guess your mama'll have to look after you," Rose went on. "Such a big, bad boy! Such an awful, spoiled child! Mama spank."

"All right," said Coke. "Get your pills and go to bed."

Rose burst out laughing and pulled his hair. Coke grabbed her, jerked her across the bed and spanked her, then he stood her on her feet.

"If I can do that laying down," he said, "just think what I could do standing up."

"You must never, never strike a lady," said Rose.

She went into the bathroom and shut the door. Coke began to doze. He heard Rose come back into the room, turn off the light, and get into bed; but it seemed like a part of the dream he had had a moment ago. He and Regan were in Regan's poolroom. One of the town bullies was playing pool with a hustler and losing. When they were through playing, the bully settled with the hustler, but didn't have enough money to pay Regan what was due for the use of the table. Regan insisted that he pay and the bully laughed at him. "Take it out of my hide," he said. Regan said "All right!" and picked up a sawed-off pool cue. The bully took one look at him, made a dive for the door, and started down the middle of the street with Regan after him, flourishing the sawed-off pool cue.

"Rose," Coke called, "I just figured out what I was laughing at. I was dreaming about one time when George chased a guy with a pool cue."

"Coke," said Rose, "I'm gonna hunt something up to hit you with. I was just falling asleep."

Coke said nothing. He turned over on his back and lay thinking about all the fun he used to have in Regan's poolroom.

The next afternoon Coke went down to Kid Halloran's gymnasium, and sat in the Kid's office talking to Bat Cahill and Ben Mandl. Mandl thought Coke was a sure thing to win the match with O'Keefe, but Cahill didn't seem to have much to say. Finally, he said:

"They tell me Riley likes the Rattler."

"He wants the short end," said Mandl, laughing.

"He's kidding," said Coke.

"Maybe," said Cahill.

Halloran came in and told them that Regan had just arrived, that he wanted to see Mandl.

"Me?" said Mandl. "I wonder what his song is today! He's always got one."

Mandl went out.

"That's a fact," said Cahill. "Regan's the damnedest guy I ever seen. Never got a cent."

"Is he borrowing from Mandl?" Coke inquired.

"Trying to," said Cahill.

"That's funny," said Coke. "When George and me was working together he always had plenty of money."

"Plenty, hell," said Cahill. "That guy never had plenty. Riley signed his note for two grand the other day."

"What does he do with his money?" asked Coke.

"Well," said Cahill, "he drops a lot of it to the bookies."

"That's a new stunt," said Coke.

"That ain't all," said Cahill. "He's got a yen for faro. Crazy man's game."

"George never used to gamble," said Coke. "Except poker."

Cahill sat looking at Coke, wondering what was on his mind. Coke always struck him as being smarter than he acted. This was probably due to the fact that he had always associated Coke with Regan, who had the reputation of being a slicker.

"George is going to hell just as fast as he can get there," Halloran put in.

"I wouldn't say that," said Cahill. "Course he drinks a lot, but he always did, long as I've known him."

"All right," said Halloran. "But he don't seem like the same George to me."

Coke sat looking at the floor, very uncomfortable. He wanted to go out and see Regan but he was afraid Regan would make fun of him.

"Well," said Cahill, "I'll say one thing for him. He don't need nobody to show him around. He's always got a meal-ticket. First it was Coke here, now it's O'Keefe and Speed De Angelo. I wouldn't waste no sympathy on a guy that smart."

"You mark what I say," said Halloran. "If George Regan don't slow down on the pace he's going he won't be with us next summer."

"He looks bad, that's a fact," said Cahill.

Coke got up.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'll be going. Drop out to the camp, Bat. Always glad to see you."

"Does that go for me too, champ?" Halloran asked.

"Sure," said Coke. "Just drop out."

When Coke had gone, Cahill said:

"Kid, I wonder what the straight story about them two is?"

"You got me," said Halloran.

"Funny thing," said Cahill. "Regan's dead sure O'Keefe'll win."

"That's a pipe dream," said Halloran. "Coke'll left hook that guy out of the ring."

"I ain't so sure," said Cahill. "Coke's had a long layoff and O'Keefe's as strong as an ox. If the odds are right I'm gonna put one grand on the Rattler for luck."

"Say," said Halloran, "I'm a poor man. Just hand me that grand now and it'll save you the trouble of getting it up."

"Funny," said Cahill; "everybody always thinks a champion's a lot better than he is."

"Kiss that grand good-bye," said Halloran.

When Coke went out into the gymnasium, he saw Regan leaning against the wall, his hat on the back of his head, talking to Mandl. A strong light was streaming in through one of the big front windows and it fell full on Regan. Coke was startled. Regan looked so frail. He had always been skinny, of course. Coke's father said he had to stand twice to make a shadow. But his face had always had a healthy, swarthy color, except when he was recuperating from a drunk, and his clothes had never actually hung on him. Now he looked like a convalescent.

Coke walked over to watch a couple of amateurs,

who were pounding away at one another. He heard Mandl say, "No, no; nothing doing." He heard Regan's retort. "I never seen a kike yet who could see farther than his nose." He saw Mandl turn on his heel and walk away; then he went over to Regan.

Regan pulled his hat down over his eyes and took out a cigar.

"Smoke," he said.

"No, thanks," said Coke. "I ain't smoking."

"Getting all set, are you?"

Regan put the cigar back into his pocket and stood with his legs crossed, looking at Coke.

"Yeah," said Coke.

"You're fat as a hog," said Regan. "You're gonna have trouble with your weight for the first time in your life."

"That's about it," said Coke.

He wanted to ask Regan how much money he needed, but he was afraid to.

"Yeah," said Regan; "I figure you won't be in such good shape. O'Keefe'll be prime. He's gonna give you a lacing, Coke."

Coke didn't say anything.

"But course you don't think so," said Regan.

"No," said Coke.

Regan started drumming on the wall, looking at Coke.

"How're you and the missus coming along?"

"All right," said Coke. "She's got a good part in Ivor Martin's new show."

"So I hear," said Regan. "Well, she'll be able to get along without you pretty soon, Coke; so get set to kiss her good-bye."

"There you go," said Coke.

"Dumb as ever," said Regan, then he stood away from the wall and nodded to Coke. "I got a heavy poker date for this afternoon, kid, so I'll be leaving you."

He started to walk away, but Coke called to him.

"George," he said, "I want to see you a minute."

Regan turned and came back.

"All right. Spill it."

"Say, George," said Coke, flushing, "don't get sore at me, but was you trying to borrow some money from Mandl?"

Regan stiffened. Coke knew he had said the wrong thing.

"What's it to you!" Regan exclaimed. "You tend to your business and I'll tend to mine."

He walked away. Coke saw him cross the long gymnasium and go into Halloran's office.

"Well," Coke told himself, "if that's the way he wants to act, he can go to hell!"

When Coke got home the clerk gave him a letter. It was from Coon and had a Japanese stamp on it. Coke went up to his apartment and sat down to read it. It was all about a mountain called Fuji and a seaport called Nagasaki and how cute Japanese children were and how much Coon had paid for a meal in Tokyo etc. Ordinarily, Coke wouldn't have been in-

terested, but now he was lonesome and the tone of the letter was so friendly. He read it three times.

"Mighty nice of Coon writing me," he said.

IV

Coke was having trouble getting into shape. Jimmy Pappas and Jeff kept insisting that he double his road-work, but he wouldn't listen to them. As fast as he sweat the weight off, it came back. One day he lost six pounds; the next day before taking to the road, he was weighed and he had gained it all back.

"Hell!" said Coke.

Jimmy Pappas and Jeff urged him to try drying-out, for a while, at least, just to see if he could lose a lot of weight that way; but Coke wouldn't listen to them. When he was thirsty, he wanted water. He wasn't going to go around thirsty all the time. What was the fun? Pappas conferred with Lewis, who smiled and shrugged, and put the full responsibility on Coke. Ruby Hall had one theory, Jimmy another, and Jeff another; they spent half of their time arguing, while Coke sat listening to them, trying to make up his mind what to do.

Finally one day, he showed a loss of five pounds, after drinking plenty of water and eating a big meal.

"O.K.," said Ruby Hall. "Now we're getting some place. You just listen to me, champ, and you'll be in shape in no time."

Coke said nothing, but Jimmy and Jeff began to

argue with Ruby, who defended himself loudly.

"My God!" yelled Coke. "Shut up, you guys. I can't hear myself think."

The next day Coke hurt his wrist sparring with Jeff. Jimmy Pappas bandaged it for him and they all held a conference in the rubbing-room. Coke listened for a while, then he got up and took a walk. He began to be worried. He was jinxed. Donaldson, the trainer he had hired, had got banged up in an automobile accident the second day at the camp. Buddy Dugan, his lightweight sparring partner, had been taken to the hospital for an appendicitis operation, and three days ago Ruby Hall had nearly drowned swimming in the bay.

"I got a jinx on me sure," Coke said.

Things were going very badly at the camp. The place was overrun with visitors and there was hardly a private spot to be found. Coke was always being followed and asked for his autograph, or for money, or wouldn't he please give some wonderful amateur a chance to show him what he could do. The newspaper men thought they owned the camp and did as they pleased. The cook would get drunk and forget to come back from town, and Coke would have to wait two hours for his supper; or something would happen to the lights just when Coke wanted to read and relax. Jimmy Pappas was a willing worker and he did his best to fill Donaldson's shoes, but he was erratic and pigheaded. Ruby Hall had to be kept well in hand

or he became dictatorial. Even Jeff joined in the clamor.

"Some day I'm gonna slap them guys to sleep," said Coke.

V

Jimmy Pappas, Jeff, Ruby Hall and Coke were sitting on the porch. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, but it was not yet dark, and a few birds were still singing in the trees on the lawn. The day had been hot with a blinding sun, and during the afternoon the thermometer had climbed to ninety-three, and the wind had been blowing off shore. But now the wind had shifted and it had begun to get cool. Coke sat looking off over the treetops. Between two poplars there was a green line of sea visible.

Jimmy Pappas took out his mouth organ and began to play. Joe Rogers, the lightweight, came running out of the living-room and sat down on the steps.

"Atta boy, Jimmy," he said.

Ruby Hall started to sing in a deep, rich baritone, and presently Joe and Jeff joined in. Jeff's bass was uncertain, but he sang so softly that his flatting didn't spoil the two-part harmony of Ruby and Joe. Coke sat listening. The song was doleful; all about unrequited love and how terrible it was to be left alone in the world. Coke felt sad. When the song came to an end, he said:

"For God's sake play something lively, Jimmy."

Jimmy grinned, shook the saliva out of his mouth organ, and started again.

"Hot dog!" said Ruby, getting to his feet and slapping his thighs.

Coke and Jeff beat time with their hands, while Ruby, rolling his eyes and grinning, did a slow nigger dance, shuffling. Joe began to sing.

> "I left Frisco Kate
> Swinging on the Golden Gate,
> When Kansas City Kitty
> Smiled at me . . ."

A taxi-cab lurched up over the steep grade at the end of the porch and stopped. Jimmy Pappas went right on playing.

"Wait a minute," said Coke.

Mandl and Cahill got out of the cab and Cahill told the driver to wait. The music stopped and Ruby Hall went inside. He didn't like Cahill, who had given him a bad beating the last time they fought.

"Well, champ," said Mandl, "how's things?"

"All right," said Coke. "Sit down. Hello, Bat."

"Hi, champ," said Cahill. "We just come out for a little visit. Thought we'd get cooled off out here."

They sat down on the steps.

"Well," said Mandl, "they're still quoting you at 3 to 1. A man can't make no money betting that way."

"Them odds are about right," said Joe Rogers.

"Tough on me, though," said Mandl. "I can't bet much with odds like that. I'm superstitious since that hundred-to-one shot beat Gustavus at Louisville. Did they take me!"

"Yeah," said Cahill. "Who took me? You did, Ben. I put three centuries on his hot tip, Coke."

"Three hundred!" said Mandl. "I wish that was all I had up."

"How's the legs, Coke?" Cahill inquired. "Heard you was having trouble."

"You heard wrong," said Coke. "The only trouble I had was with my weight. But that's all right now. The newspaper guys ain't giving me a square deal. To hear them talk you'd think I was as old as Jim Corbett."

"That's the way they always talk about a champion," said Mandl. "Just filling space. Giving their readers something they can understand. If you win they'll say you did pretty well for a man your age; if you lose they'll say it was youth that done it. Like Dempsey. Tunney was about six months younger, I think."

"I ain't figuring to lose," said Coke, gloomily.

"Course you ain't, champ," said Cahill.

"But I wish we could knock them odds down," said Mandl. "Couldn't you and Lewis pull something?"

"Listen, Ben," said Coke, flying up suddenly, "nothing doing! I wish to God you guys would let me alone. I got enough on my mind without thinking about odds and that kind of stuff. Everything's on me. I can't get nobody to do nothing around here. I got them

newspaper guys on my trail from morning till night. And if it ain't them, it's some of you guys. It's enough to drive a guy crazy."

"But, champ . . ." Mandl began.

Jeff kicked him on the shins.

"Yeah," said Coke, paying no attention to the interruption; "I ain't seen Lewis for two days, and Tim Morgan's only been out here twice since I started to train. Yeah! No matter what comes up, they say, "See Coke!" By God, I got to be the manager and the promoter, besides the main attraction. By God, I'll bet you they'll want me to take tickets at the gate the night of the fight."

He got to his feet and began to pace up and down.

"Never mind, champ," said Mandl. "Forget it. We won't bother you no more."

Coke went inside without saying another word.

"Lord!" said Cahill; "he sure is on edge. They got him worried. Well, it's a tough break, but it's his own fault. What did he want to team up with a guy like Lewis for? Damn dressed-up highhatter!"

"His wife," said Jeff.

"Less said about that the better," Mandl put in.

"I ain't talking," said Jeff.

"Well, somebody ought to," said Joe Rogers.

"You guys better pipe down," said Jimmy Pappas. "If the champ hears you, you'll get a busted nose."

Nobody said anything. Mandl took out a cigar-case and passed it around. In the silence that followed the

lighting of the cigars, they heard a crash inside the house.

"Lordy, champ," they heard Ruby Hall saying, "I didn't see you sitting there."

"Well, by God," came Coke's voice, "you better get your eyes open and pick up your big flat feet or something's liable to happen to you. Get the hell out of here!"

Ruby appeared on the front porch.

"Man!" he said. "The champ sure is raring!"

Joe began to laugh, but Jimmy got up and went inside.

"I never seen him sitting there," said Ruby. "I just walked thoo the room and fell over his feet. It was dark. I ain't no cat."

"Never mind," said Mandl. "They just got him all upset, that's all."

"Yeah," said Ruby; "and I'm telling you that man ain't two-fifths of what he was. He gets tired in the legs."

"Will you shut up," said Jeff.

"It's all right between us," said Mandl. "Let's hear it. I'm already up on the champion some. So what's the difference?"

"Me, too," lied Cahill.

"We ain't giving out no information," said Jeff. "The champ looks good to me, that's all."

"What he needs is Regan," said Mandl.

"By God," said Cahill, "that reminds me. Have you guys heard the latest?"

"Yeah," said Mandl; "it's good. But I wasn't gonna say nothing with Coke here."

"Me, neither," said Cahill.

"What's George been doing?" Jeff inquired.

"He got pinched for drunkenness and assault and battery," said Cahill, laughing. "It took Tim Morgan and half the big shots in town to get the case squashed. Ain't that good? Tim's trying to keep it out of the papers, but it'll get in."

"Hell, that's nothing," said Jeff.

"Yeah," said Mandl; "some wise guy down at O'Keefe's camp started wisecracking Regan about playing both ends against the middle, and Regan popped him. Oh, it was good!"

"Hell," said Jeff; "you should have seen the time out in Leadville when a gang of toughs tried to mob Coke and the referee, because Coke licked one of the local boys. Some of the guys tried to bust in the dressing-room door. George got himself a chair and opened the door. The first two guys in got the chair over the head. The other guys stayed out."

They all laughed.

"Yeah," said Joe Rogers. "Ever since I was a kid I've heard my old man talk about George Regan. The old man knew him out in Omaha."

They sat silent for a while, all of them intent on their cigars. Then Mandl said:

"Well, all kidding aside, I feel sorry for Regan. He says he hates Coke like poison, but he don't. Funny!

But let me tell you one thing, if Coke ain't in A-one shape he's gonna have his troubles with O'Keefe; because Regan knows Coke from the ground up, an' he's killing himself coaching O'Keefe."

Jeff sighed and stared at the lighted end of his cigar.

"Rattler'll never lick the champion," said Joe Rogers. "It ain't in the cards."

"I think you're right," said Mandl. "But I wouldn't take no affidavit to that effect."

"O'Keefe's as strong as an ox," said Cahill. "But he's easy to hit especially around the body, and that's the champ's long suit. It all depends."

"Well," said Mandl, getting to his feet, "we might as well be getting back. What do you say, Bat?"

"I'm ready."

Mandl stood silent for a moment, then he said:

"Jeff, run in and tell the champ we're going and ask him if he wants us to do anything for him in town."

Jeff got up and went inside. Mandl took a couple of yellow-backs out of his pocket and handed them to Ruby and Rogers.

"There's some chicken feed," he said; "keep me posted."

Ruby looked at Joe, who stared back at him. Ruby shrugged and slipped the money into his pocket. Joe did the same.

"Yes sir, Mr. Mandl," said Ruby.

Jeff came back.

"He's asleep," he said.

"All right," said Mandl. "So long."

"I wouldn't say nothing to him about Regan," said Cahill.

"No," said Jeff.

VI

THERE was a big crowd watching Coke work out with Ruby Hall. Ruby was in wonderful condition and was dancing on his toes all around the champion, who followed him flatfooted, his chin on his chest, scowling. Ruby leapt in, played a tattoo on Coke's ribs and got away without a return. The newspaper men glanced at each other and smiled. Ruby repeated this maneuver and made Coke miss a long right. Coke's timing was bad. But Ruby was overconfident now and, wanting to make an impression on the crowd, he tried to slug with Coke. Coke took a couple of hard clouts to the head, but he didn't back up. He never did. Then he landed his famous left hook and Ruby arched his body. Coke swung his right and missed. Ruby tried his rushing tactics again and Coke landed another left hook. Ruby didn't like it and backed away. The bell rang.

"It's all he's got," said one newspaper man; "but it's enough. O'Keefe's easy to hit. Six of those hooks'll kill him."

"Yeah," said another reporter, "but the champion looks off color to me."

"Well," said the first reporter, "I don't know. This is the first time he ever entered the ring as a favorite.

He's clumsy. You can't tell nothing about him."

"He's a toe-dancer compared to the Rattler. This is gonna be some fight. "

Coke worked a round with Joe Rogers, who was fast as lightning; then Jeff climbed through the ropes. Jeff was a good, honest fighter. He was aggressive and could take punishment, but he couldn't hit very hard. For the first sixty seconds he looked like the champion instead of Coke, but presently Coke began to land his body punches and Jeff slowed down. Most of the newspaper men didn't know what to think; but they all agreed that the champion looked fat, that he seemed slower than usual, and that his timing was not up to the mark.

In the dressing-room Coke said:

"My legs is tired, Jimmy."

Pappas grinned.

"Don't let that bother you, champ. You're coming around fine. You got to quit worrying, champ."

"All right."

Coke dressed slowly. It was hot, and before he got into his clothes sweat was dripping from his forehead.

"Look at me sweating," said Coke. "I oughtn't to be sweating like that."

"Say," said Jimmy, "don't hunt things to worry about. You ought to be glad you can sweat."

Coke broke a shoe lace. He pulled off the shoe and flung it across the room.

"There's a jinx on me, by God!" he cried. "Everything goes wrong around the goddam place. Listen,

Jimmy, this morning when I was out on the road with Joe and Jeff a black cat run right across in front of me. I tried to head him off, but he was too fast for me."

Jimmy retrieved Coke's shoe, put a new lace in it, and, bending down, put it on for him and tied it, but said nothing.

"Are you superstitious, Jimmy?" Coke inquired.

"No," said Jimmy. "That's all bunk. Only one thing. I don't like busted mirrors."

"Well,'" said Coke, "maybe you ain't superstitious, but I am. My father was, too. So's George Regan. I used to get him going by standing behind him when he was playing poker."

He laughed, then his face fell.

"Anyway," he said, "I don't like black cats. Jeff was gonna take a stone and kill the cat, but I wouldn't let him. It might be some kid's cat."

"Sure," said Jimmy.

Joe put his head in the door.

"Champ," he said, "a couple of newspaper guys want to see you. How about it?"

Coke leapt to his feet.

"No," he cried; "I'm sick of 'em! The hell with 'em. Why don't they go see Lewis? Why don't they go see Tim Morgan? No, I don't want to see 'em. They never write what you tell 'em, anyway. They might just as well stay home and make it up."

"I'll talk to 'em," said Jimmy. "Only what'll I say, champ?"

Coke stared at Jimmy, then he burst out:

"I wish to God there was somebody around this camp that knew something!"

"I'll take care of 'em for you," said Jimmy.

"Tell 'em I'm in wonderful shape," said Coke. "Tell 'em I'll win by a knockout. And then tell 'em to go to hell."

He went into an adjoining room, banging the door.

"Whew!" said Joe.

Jimmy just shook his head.

VII

It was nearly ten o'clock but Coke was still sitting on the front porch, showing no signs of getting ready for bed. Jimmy was sitting on the steps playing his mouth organ softly. Ruby was lying in a hammock, snoring.

Coke sat looking out over the lawn toward the sea. The moon was up and between the two big poplars he could see its reflection on the water. He felt lonesome. Joe came out and sat down beside Jimmy, who began a new tune. Joe started to sing:

> "Moonlight and roses,
> Bring wonderful mem'ries
> Of you. . . ."

"Say," said Coke, "I wish you guys would lay off them sappy songs. Why don't you sing some good, lively song?"

Jimmy stopped playing and they sat in silence. Coke got up and went out on the lawn where he stood look-

ing at the far away image of the moon on the water. He liked to look at the moon. When he was a kid his mother used to tell him it was a big balloon. It looked like it, only it had a picture on it, a man's face or something. Funny! He turned and came back.

"Jimmy," he said, "I'm gonna take your Ford and ride around a little."

"It's about your bedtime, champ," said Jimmy. "Wait till tomorrow, and I'll take you right after supper."

"No," said Coke; "I just want to ride around a little by myself. I'll be back in a half hour, then I'll hit the hay."

"Well," said Jimmy.

"For God's sake be careful, champ," said Joe.

"I'll be careful," said Coke. "It'd be my funeral, wouldn't it?"

He climbed into Jimmy's Ford and started down the road.

"You suppose he's heading for town?" Jimmy demanded suddenly.

"That's my guess," said Joe.

"He's worried about that wife of his," said Jimmy, "and I don't blame him. She plays 'em all. I used to live a couple of doors from her. I knew her before Coke ever married her. She never could see me, though."

"She can put her shoes under my bed," said Joe.

Coke himself didn't know what he intended to do till he had driven through Ash Harbor. But an hour later he stopped in front of his apartment hotel and

went in. The clerk was surprised to see him and rather confusedly told him that he didn't think his wife was in although he hadn't seen her go out.

"Never mind," said Coke. "I got a key."

But as soon as Coke got into the elevator, the clerk called his apartment.

Coke unlocked the door and went in. Rose, in a cerise kimono, was standing in the middle of the living-room. She looked flushed and rumpled. She ran over to him and kissed him.

"Well, papa," she demanded, "what are you doing here?"

"I got lonesome for you, honey," said Coke. "Why don't you never drive out to the camp to see me?"

"I been awful busy," said Rose, pushing him into a chair and sitting opposite him. "Anyway, Paul told me I better stay away from camp, it might upset you."

"Yeah," said Coke. "He's right there, I guess. But you ought to call me up, or something. I get lonesome as the devil out there."

"Just stick to it, Coke," said Rose. "There ain't much time left. How you feeling?"

"Fair," said Coke. "But there's a jinx on that camp."

Rose laughed.

"I'm telling you straight," Coke went on. "Everything goes wrong."

"You ought to have your friend George Regan running things," said Rose.

"Well," said Coke, "I'll say one thing for George: he can sure keep things moving at a training camp."

"I guess you haven't heard the latest."

"About George?"

"Yeah," said Rose, and she told him about Regan's escapade, adding to it a little on her own account. "Yeah," she went on, "and it took everybody in town to keep him out of jail."

Coke sat staring at the floor.

"A fine boy, that friend of yours," said Rose.

"We ain't friends no more," said Coke.

"No," said Rose, "and you ought to be darn glad you're not. He's gonna get himself in an awful mess some day. If it wasn't for Paul and me you'd still have that poolroom bum ordering you around like you was some palooka instead of the champion."

"George sure is a bossy guy, that's a fact," said Coke.

Rose sat playing with the sash of her kimono, and Coke glanced at the clock.

"God," he said, "I ought to be in bed. Them guys out at the camp'll have the police looking for me."

"Yeah," said Rose; "you better get started."

Coke was looking at Rose. There was something about the way she acted that puzzled him. She didn't seem like the same Rose. Before he had gone to the camp they used to sit and talk about fighting and things, and she'd look at him as if she was taking a big interest. Now he felt like he was talking to somebody he didn't know very well.

"Yeah," said Coke; "I guess it was kind of silly to run in here like this, but I got lonesome."

"I know," said Rose.

"You been lonesome, too, honey?"

"Why, sure," said Rose, but she didn't say it as if she meant it.

Coke got up. He was sure there was something wrong but he didn't know quite how to go about mentioning the fact. What could he say? He said nothing. Rose got up and put her arms around him.

"You ought to've called me up," she said, "and I'd 've had a little lunch ready for you."

Coke grinned.

"Much oblige," he said. "But I ain't eating at night now."

He glanced apprehensively at the clock.

"Coke," said Rose, "are you sure enough in good shape? Paul says he don't know."

"He don't know nothing," said Coke. "He's a hell of a manager. I got to do all the work. Sure I'm in good shape. I'll lick that Irishman till he begs for mercy."

"Good," said Rose, kissing him.

"Well," said Coke, "I guess I better be hauling myself back. I wish to God I could stay in here all night with you, honey."

"I do too," said Rose. "But that's against the rules."

"Yeah," said Coke, smiling. "Well, see you after the fight."

"All right, honey," said Rose, holding the door open for him.

She seemed in sort of a hurry to Coke, but he didn't say anything. He kissed her again and went out. When

he left the elevator he saw Riley and a couple of his friends standing in the lobby. Riley turned and said:

"Well, if it ain't the champion himself. What you doing out this time of night? I thought they had you buried down in Ash Harbor."

Coke shook hands with Riley and the other men, both big gamblers. Riley asked him if he wouldn't sit and talk to them for a little while as they were waiting for some women and had some time to kill.

"I got to be getting back to camp," said Coke. "I just run in to see my wife. She ain't been feeling well."

Riley winked at the men behind Coke's back.

"That's too bad," said Riley. "Sit down, champ. Let's have a session. We ain't had a good jaw together since you left Chicago. "

"No," said Coke; "that's a fact!"

They all sat down. Coke felt guilty and from time to time looked at his watch; but one of the gamblers, Joe Stein, kept telling one story after another and they were all funny. Coke laughed long and loud, for the first time in weeks. He began to feel very friendly toward Mr. Stein, a man who could tell such funny stories with such a solemn face. The other gambler, a Texan named Ray, had nothing to say and sat staring at his shoes, smiling slightly at Stein's stories. Forty-five minutes passed before Coke could prod himself into going. Finally he got to his feet.

"Going?" Riley inquired.

"Yeah," said Coke. "The boys out at the camp'll be turning handsprings."

"Say," said Stein, "if you wait till the women show we'll drive you out. We can go for the ride."

"What's keeping 'em?" Coke wanted to know.

"It's like this," said Stein. "They're show girls and one's got a husband and the other two have got red-hot sweeties they got to ditch. So we just have to be patient."

They all laughed.

"Well," said Coke, "I got Jimmy Pappas's Ford out here anyway. I'm going. I sure did enjoy the session. I ain't laughed like that since I can remember. Drop out to the camp and see me, all of you."

He shook hands all around and left them. As he was passing the elevator, the doors opened and Lewis stepped out. Seeing Coke, Lewis made a slight, convulsive movement as if to climb back into the elevator, then, smiling, he held out his hand.

"Well, champ," he said, "this is an unexpected pleasure."

Coke kept his hands in his pockets and stared at Lewis. He was in a very bad humor. The transition from his mood of a moment ago, a mood induced by the stories of Mr. Stein, was so abrupt that he wasn't sure just why he felt like hitting something hard, like arguing loudly and disagreeing violently. His irritation fastened on Lewis's clothes. He was wearing a big, floppy panama with a narrow black-band; his suit was made of some summer material, gray with a white pin stripe; the coat was double-breasted and the trousers full and long. He was carefully shaved and pow-

dered, and his black sideburns were so symmetrical that they looked as if they had been cut out with scissors and pasted on.

"Well," said Coke, "you sure are dressed to kill. Where you been?"

Lewis smiled and touched Coke on the leg with his cane.

"Is that a nice question?"

Coke stared at him.

"I might know where you been," he said. "Fooling around with some woman. Don't you never get sick of that?"

"Well," said Lewis, "that's my weakness."

"Yeah," said Coke. "Some day somebody's gonna ketch you at it and then they'll bury you. Why don't you leave Mrs. Wills alone?"

Lewis seemed very much surprised.

"Why . . . !" he said.

"Don't try to lie to me," said Coke. "I know all about it. Ain't you ashamed of yourself acting that way? I don't see how you can sit and talk to Marty the way you do and then act like that."

Lewis smiled and swung his cane.

"You seem to know so much about it," he said. "I won't say a word."

"No use lying to me," said Coke. "I know. I got the dope straight."

"I'm not saying a word," said Lewis.

Coke stood looking at Lewis for a moment, then he said:

"Well, I got to be moving back to camp."

"Yeah," said Lewis. "I was wondering what you were doing out this time of night."

"That's my business," said Coke, looking for trouble.

"Certainly," said Lewis. "I'm not arguing with you. I just wondered."

"I came in to see my wife," said Coke. "I got lonesome."

"I know just how you feel," said Lewis. "I don't blame you a bit."

Coke shifted, feeling better now, then he grinned.

"Well, Paul," he said. "I'm on my way. Want to ride downtown in a Ford?"

"No," said Lewis, "I got a taxi ordered."

Coke turned to go, but Lewis put his hand on his shoulder.

"By the way, champ," he said. "You got rid of Regan at just the right time. He got himself in an awful mess the other night, and they tell me he owes everybody in town."

"I know," said Coke.

Coke and Lewis walked out of the hotel together. Lewis's cab was waiting. He offered his hand and Coke shook it.

"I'll be out tomorrow afternoon," said Lewis. "We'll talk things over."

"All right," said Coke. "So long."

He tried to make his voice sound friendly, but he didn't succeed. Lewis irritated him with his immaculate sideburns, his carefully pressed clothes, his oily

manner. Lewis wasn't his kind. He climbed into the Ford and stepped on the starter.

"Damn dude that's all he is," he said. "Just a damn dressed up dummy always playing around with somebody else's women. He better never get funny with the wife or I'll slug him good and proper, and then where'll he be with his pretty hair!"

He spun the Ford in the middle of the street and was cursed by a taxi driver, who scraped fenders with him.

"Get out of your cab and say that," yelled Coke, but the taxi driver didn't even look back.

When Coke got out of the heavily travelled district, he pushed the accelerator to the floor, thinking that it was a good thing the boys at camp couldn't see him. He thought about Tim Morgan and how sore he'd be if he knew that his prize drawing-card was hitting fifty miles an hour at this time of night. Out beyond the city limits, he passed several roadhouses surrounded by parked automobiles; a little further on, the estates of the rich began to appear with their tall mansions set back from the highway. Coke glanced at them in passing, slowing down for a mile or two.

"Some day I'm gonna have me a dump like that," he said. "Then maybe Rose'll be satisfied."

For no reason that he could discover, a sudden suspicion crossed his mind. He tried to shake it off and laugh, but it was no use; it clung. Why had Rose been so flushed and mussed up? Why had she been so anxious to get him out of the apartment? Why had Lewis tried

to step back into the elevator as if to hide? He remembered all of Regan's insinuations, and as he drove along, slowly now, he went back over all that Regan had ever said to him about Rose. He recalled their quarrel after the Prince Pearl go, when Regan had said something about a part-time boy-friend and he had been on the point of slugging him. He recalled Regan's repeated warnings of what would happen to him if he took Rose back. He thought of the many times that Rose had gone out with Coon and Lewis; of how one night he had said to Mrs. Lewis "them guys are playing tag with my wife" and Mrs. Lewis had replied that they had been doing it all evening. He recalled seeing Lewis and Coon arguing in his apartment one afternoon, when the rest had gone, and how, even at the time, he had thought that it was queer for a millionaire like Coon to be arguing over money. Still there was Mrs. Wills.

When he drove into camp, Jimmy Pappas was sitting on the porch alone, softly playing his mouth organ. Coke parked the Ford and climbed the stairs slowly.

"Well," said Jimmy, "I was just getting ready to send the police out looking for you."

Coke sat down on the steps.

"I went in to see the missus," he said.

"We figured maybe you would," said Jimmy.

Coke looked up at him, but said nothing.

"Yeah," said Jimmy, "we wasn't worried much. We figured you was getting pretty lonesome for the missus."

He paused, but as Coke made no comment, he added: "She's getting better looking every day."

Coke sat silent for a while, then he got up and went into the house.

"Goodnight, champ," said Jimmy. "How about tomorrow morning?"

"Regular time," said Coke.

"O.K.," said Jimmy, then he started playing his mouth organ again, more softly than before.

Coke undressed and got into bed, where he lay turning from side to side. He remembered the night in Chicago a few days before the Prince Pearl go, when he had lain awake half the night, thinking about Rose. He had her now, but here he was lying awake just the same.

"Funny," he said.

He began to feel drowsy, and in the midst of this drowsiness a comforting thought came to him. It was the training. When he was training he always looked on the dark side of things and was inclined to be suspicious and irritable, to be bothered by attacks of the blues.

"That's it," he thought, relieved. "It's the training, that's all."

In a few minutes he was snoring.

VIII

Coke, in a sweater, an old pair of pants, and a cap, strode up and down the room, while Jimmy Pappas,

Ruby Hall, Jeff Davis and Lewis argued. One said Coke ought to take it easy the first few rounds and wear the Rattler down; another said he ought to try for a knockout in the first part of the fight, as the Rattler was a limit fighter and tough as they make them; Lewis had qualifications and suggestions no matter who was talking, and Ruby Hall declared that nobody knew anything, implying that he was the one to be consulted. Coke listened with growing irritation. He remembered Regan's curt orders and the silent way that they were received by the other men. Regan was bossy and pig-headed and hard to get along with, a drunkard and a tough guy, but he knew his business, and if anybody tried to tell him what to do he shut them up. Coke looked at Lewis. There he sat in a white flannel, double-breasted suit, his panama at just the proper angle, languidly tapping his foot with his cane, and occasionally making an indecisive gesture with a manicured hand. Regan would have been dominating them, ridiculing them, laughing in their faces; with a dirty straw hat on the back of his head and his shirt open at the neck. Coke stopped and stood listening to the clamor for a moment, then he hit the table with his fist.

"Watch your hand," said Jimmy, starting half out of his chair.

"Shut up," said Coke. He looked at each of them in turn. "Listen, you guys, you might just as well cut out this arguing, because I'm gonna fight to suit myself. What the hell do you birds know about it, anyway! This is all just so much wind. I'm going in there and lick

this Irishman to a standstill. If it takes two rounds, all right, and if it takes ten, all right. Now get this through your heads: I'm running this show and I'll fight to suit myself."

They all sat looking at Coke: Ruby Hall sulking, Jeff stupefied, Jimmy Pappas hurt, and Lewis indifferent.

"Well," said Lewis, "you're the champion and you ought to know your business."

When the meeting broke up, Lewis shook hands all around, handed out twenty-five cent cigars, and went out. Ruby Hall sat sulking; but Jeff and Jimmy followed Coke out into the backyard and sat with him. Coke said nothing. Jimmy took out his mouth organ and began to play; Jeff tried to sing, but was afraid of annoying Coke by singing loudly, so he compromised by muttering. After a while, Ruby Hall joined them.

PART VIII

I

Coke sat in his street clothes with his knees apart and his forearms resting on his thighs. He felt tired. Beyond the dressing-room he heard the clamor of the crowd. Jeff was sitting across from him, getting the bandages ready, and Jimmy Pappas, nearly unnerved, was walking up and down smoking a big cigar. Tim Morgan put his head in the door.

"Hello, champ," he said, grinning. "Great crowd. We're gonna turn away a couple of thousand. Better get your duds on. I don't think either one of these next bouts are gonna go the limit."

"I got plenty of time," said Coke, yawning and stretching.

Tim withdrew his head and shut the door. Coke got to his feet, hesitated, then sank back on his chair.

"What's the matter, champ?" Jimmy anxiously inquired.

"Nothing!" shouted Coke.

Jeff and Jimmy exchanged a glance, then Jeff went on unwrapping and rewrapping the bandages, and Jimmy paced up and down.

"Listen, Jimmy," said Coke, finally, "throw that cigar away and sit down. You're getting on my nerves."

"O.K., champ," said Jimmy, stamping out the cigar and sitting down.

Coke got up and began to undress slowly.

"Goddam, it's cold in here," he said, as he pulled off his shirt.

"Cold," said Jimmy. "I'm sweating."

"You would be," said Coke. "But I'm cold."

There was a prolonged roar from the crowd, and the walls of the dressing-room vibrated slightly. Coke thought of Chicago and the Prince Pearl go. He fell back into his chair, half-undressed.

"I don't know what makes me so tired," he said.

Jimmy looked at Jeff, who glanced at Coke; neither of them spoke.

"Hell," Coke exclaimed, leaping to his feet and stripping off his clothes. "I got to snap into it, or it'll take me five rounds to lick that dub."

This was bravado, and Jimmy knew it; but he was relieved all the same. Jeff went on with his work. Coke got into his togs and stood in the middle of the dressing-room working his arms like pistons; then he shadow-boxed for a moment.

"All right, Jeff," he said.

Jeff put the bandages aside and Coke climbed up on the table and lay down. Jimmy got up and began to pace the floor again, but remembering what Coke had said, he sat down and flexed his fingers. Coke lay quiet with his eyes closed, while Jeff lightly massaged his muscles. Lewis came in, looked down at him, and said: "O.K.?" Coke nodded and Lewis went out.

"Hell of a manager he is," said Coke.

Nobody said anything.

Coke wanted Regan. He lay there worrying about the fight, wondering what would be the best thing to do. Should he try to hook O'Keefe to hell and back during the first few rounds, like he had Larsen, or should he hold off, stall, like he had done against Prince Pearl, and wait for a perfect opening? Should he give O'Keefe all he had with his right or should he wait till he was tiring? What made his legs feel so funny? And why did he feel slightly sick at his stomach? Maybe he had eaten some bum food; maybe somebody had put something in it. He had heard of that. He lay there worrying; at one moment anxious for the fight to begin, then fearing it would begin before his legs began to feel normal.

"Feeling O.K., champ?" Jeff inquired.

"Yeah," said Coke. "Give my legs a good rub."

He felt alone. Jeff was faithful and hardworking and dependable, but dumb. Jimmy was excitable and nervous. Coke had the full responsibility for the conduct of the fight. Jimmy, as chief second, wouldn't be able to help him any. The best thing he could do was to rush inside O'Keefe's left and murder him. If he could hit him with half a dozen hooks squarely, he'd have him. But how would O'Keefe fight? Some stalling way, you could bet, with Regan managing him. Coke wanted to confide in somebody, to ask advice, at the very least to talk the fight over; even that would have been some relief. But he said nothing and lay with his eyes closed, while Jeff rubbed him.

There was a prolonged roar from the crowd. Joe Rogers came in.

"Ruby won by a knockout," he said.

Coke sighed and envied Ruby Hall. He was all through for the evening, and could go back to his dressing-room with not a thing on his mind except maybe a good steak and a stein of beer. Or else he could get his clothes on and sit, without a worry, watching the other boys in the ring.

"How you feeling, champ?" Joe inquired.

"O.K."

"All right," said Jeff, tapping Coke on the shoulder.

Coke got up and put on a sweater and a bathrobe, as Regan had always made him do. Then he sat on the rubbing-table, swinging his feet. In a few minutes Regan came in to watch Jeff put on the bandages, while Jimmy went to O'Keefe's dressing-room to watch McNeil. Regan was drunk, had a two day beard, and looked haggard.

"Hello, George," said Coke.

"Hello, Coke," said Regan. "They tell me you're in A-one condition."

"Yeah," said Coke; "I had trouble with my weight, but I'm all set now."

"Well," said Regan, "a pound more would have cost you. You better try the lightheavy class after the Rattler gets through with you."

"I been thinking about it," said Coke.

"Yeah," said Regan; "you can lick anybody in that division with the right kind of management. Unless O'Keefe tries it. He had trouble with his weight himself. He's got big bones. He ain't like you."

"I can lick O'Keefe and not half try," said Coke.

"That's what the wise money says," said Regan. "But the wise money ain't always right. Riley's betting on O'Keefe."

Coke got red in the face. "Shut up," he said. "Don't try none of your tricks on me."

Jeff looked at Regan, who, to Jeff's astonishment, said nothing. When the bandages were wrapped and O.K.'d, Regan gave Jeff a push and said:

"Beat it and take the lightweight with you. I got private business with the champion."

"It won't look good, George," said Jeff.

"The hell with that," said Regan. "Beat it. I don't care where Rogers goes, but you stay outside the door, Jeff, and don't let nobody in."

"I don't like it," said Jeff.

Coke hesitated, then said:

"All right, Jeff. Do what George tells you."

Jeff and Rogers went out. Regan waited until the door was closed, then he pulled up a chair opposite Coke and sat down.

"Get it over, George," said Coke. "We ain't got all night."

Regan took a blackjack out of his hip pocket, put the leather loop around his wrist, and sat tapping the leg of his chair with it.

"Coke," he said, "I got something I want to tell you that you won't like. You're a pretty hot headed guy in some ways and pretty husky, so I ain't taking no chances." He held up the blackjack. "See this? That

ain't just a bluff. You get funny with me before I get through with my story, and I'll put you out before O'Keefe does."

Coke stared at Regan. He noticed that Regan's eyes were unsteady and that his hands were shaking.

"George," he said, "you're drunk, that's what's the matter with you. You better put that jack away and go lay down someplace."

Regan laughed.

"Well," he said, "I paid enough for this jag; I better be drunk. Boy, them bootleggers cut liquor something awful in New York. Worse than Chicago."

Coke sat looking at Regan, who kept tapping the blackjack against the leg of the chair.

"Coke," he said, "remember the time we had that little argument down at The Viennese and you beat me to it with a one-two punch?"

"Yeah," said Coke. "George, I'm sorry . . ."

"Wait a minute," Regan interposed. "I don't give a damn about you being sorry. That don't help you none. Listen, Coke. Remember what caused that fracas?"

"Yeah," said Coke. "You was shooting off your mouth about the missus."

"All right," said Regan. "Get all set, because you're gonna hear some more of it."

Coke flushed and jumped down from the rubbing-table. Regan got hastily to his feet and stood waiting for Coke to rush him, the blackjack set. But Coke didn't rush him; he stood looking at him.

"What's the idea, George?" he demanded, wearily.

"Are you trying to get me all upset so maybe O'Keefe'll have a chance to get a draw?"

Regan laughed and took a letter out of his pocket.

"Take a look at this," he said.

Coke took the letter and tried to read it, but the writing was so peculiar that he could only make out a word or two. He turned to the last page and looked at the signature. It read: "yours truly, Louise Lewis."

"I can't read this stuff, George," he said. "Why don't you wait till after the fight?"

Regan laughed.

"My God, but you're dumb," he said. "I got a boy waiting over across the corridor that's gonna be the next middleweight champion of the world. It's time we had a champion that ain't tied to a woman's apron strings. Listen, you big sap." Regan turned to the middle of the letter and began to read: ". . . since you insist, I will tell you. Yes, I am going to enter suit against my husband, Paul Lewis, for a divorce. He has never been anything but a woman chaser. He has spent all my money on other women, and made me a laughing stock. I have enough evidence against him to get a divorce in any court, and I am going to name Mr. Mason's wife, whom you inquired about. . . "

Regan threw back his head and laughed.

"There you are, boy. There's the noise in black and white. You wouldn't believe friend George when he told you, would you? Oh, no, I was a liar and tough and not fit to associate with. You had to get high society people like your wife and Lewis."

Coke dropped his hands helplessly.

"Is it straight, George?" he demanded. "You ain't kidding me?"

"Kidding, hell," said Regan. "How do you suppose Rose got such a good part in Martin's show. Course she's got the stuff, but they ain't handing out parts like that to strangers. I'll tell you. First, because she was the champion's wife. Second, because she was Lewis's fancy woman."

"I thought maybe that was it," said Coke.

He stood weaving from side to side, rubbing the palms of his hands against his thighs, an expression of acute misery on his face.

"Yeah," said Regan. "You thought right. Listen, why do you suppose Coon left town so sudden. He was scared out. He spent too much time with your sweet woman. You didn't give a damn, but Lewis did; and he made it so hot for Coon that he decided to take a trip around the world. Get the idea? Lewis played the freeze out game. He's got a strong yen for your woman, and he ain't letting nothing stand in his way. You're the next freeze-out."

Coke made a sudden movement that Regan misinterpreted. He raised the blackjack, but Coke sprang past him and flung the door violently open. Jeff looked startled.

"Jeff," said Coke, "go get Lewis. Bring him right away."

Jeff rubbed his hands over his face.

"Champ, I don't like this business," he said.

"Get going," said Coke.

Regan took a flask out of his pocket and tipped it up. Coke came back and stood in the middle of the room, staring at the floor. Jeff had left the door wide open and loiterers were peering in. Coke turned and closed the door. He flung off his bathrobe; his face was a dull red. He clenched his fists and hit them together.

"I'll kill him, George," he said. "Just as sure as you're here, I'll kill him."

"Go as far as you like," said Regan.

There was a noise in the corridor. Tim Morgan came in followed by half a dozen of his employees. Lewis came in a little behind them. Jeff edged his way through the crowd. When he saw the expression on Coke's face, he hurried over to him.

"What the hell's going on in here!" Tim bellowed. "What you think this is, Regan? You get the hell out of here or I'll throw you out. I've had enough trouble with you, you damn drunk!"

Coke walked toward Lewis. Jeff took hold of Coke's arm, but Coke threw him off and rushed at Lewis, who cried: "Hold him! Hold him!" and made for the door. But Coke caught Lewis before he reached the door and knocked him into the corridor with a swishing uppercut to the jaw. Tim Morgan, Jeff and Morgan's men grabbed Coke from behind and held him, while he cursed and kicked back at them. Lewis lay unconscious in the corridor. His panama was jammed over his face and his cane was lying broken at his side. One of Morgan's men went over to Lewis and raised his head.

Lewis began to bleed from the mouth. Jeff shut the door.

"Well," said Morgan, "I been in the fight game for twenty years and I never seen nothing like this."

Regan laughed.

"Just one of George Regan's shows," he said.

"Yeah," said Tim, "and this is the last show George Regan'll ever put on in New York. The Commission's gonna take action on you tomorrow. Soon as this fight's over."

"I've heard all that stuff before," said Regan. "Tomorrow morning I'll be the manager of another champion, then what you gonna do?"

He went out. During the opening and closing of the door, Coke, who was sitting on the rubbing-table, saw two men lifting Lewis to his feet. Lewis had his head bent and his hands over his face. Coke jumped to his feet and ran to the door before anybody could stop him. Jeff was the first to reach him, and grabbed his arm from behind, but Coke made no effort to get away.

"Lewis," cried Coke, "if I ever see you again I'll kill you. You get the missus out of my apartment."

Lewis nodded without looking at him. Then Coke went back and lay down on the rubbing-table. Jeff bent over him.

"Are you all right, champ?"

"Yeah," said Coke.

Jimmy Pappas and Joe Rogers came in and stood staring at Coke. There was a long roar from the crowd. Tim Morgan took off his hat, mopped his brow with a big handkerchief, and said:

"My God, what an evening!"

One of Morgan's men put his head in the door.

"Ready for the main-go, boss!"

Tim Morgan nodded and walked over to the rubbing-table.

"Mason," he said, "are you all set?"

"Yeah," said Coke, "only I got to have my right mit bandaged again."

Morgan turned to the man at the door.

"Get O'Keefe out," he said. "It won't hurt him to wait a minute."

The man went out. Morgan sat down beside Jeff and watched him rebandage Coke's right hand.

II

When Coke climbed into the ring O'Keefe was already in his corner, leaning back against the ropes and talking to McNeil with a grin on his face. Coke mitted the crowd without raising his eyes and then sat in his corner staring at the canvas. The ring was full; newspaper men were in a circle around Regan, who was laughing, talking, and handing out cigars; Tim Morgan and the judges were in a neutral corner, talking loudly to make themselves heard. When the referee, Leo Harness, climbed into the ring there was a long burst of applause from the crowd.

Because of the confusion in the heavyweight ranks, due to the retirement of the champion, the lightheavy and the middleweight divisions had taken on an impor-

tance they had never had before. The O'Keefe-Mason match had drawn a record crowd. The Ball Park was packed, and a disappointed mob milled outside the ticket windows. The crowd had come to see Coke Mason work. His reputation as a slugger drew them. Most of them didn't concede Rattler O'Keefe a possible chance, but that didn't matter. They wanted to see punching, and for days the newspapers and magazines had been assuring them that "when Coke Mason fights something always happens." They had seen him flatten Larsen in two rounds; they had seen him score a technical knockout over Mike Shay, who had never been off his feet before; badly beaten, they had seen him spurt up in the final rounds and win a unanimous decision over Joe Savella, when Joe was still good; they had seen him batter Cahill to the canvas in three rounds, and they had yelled themselves hoarse at his sensational victory over Soldier Bayliss, who had dynamite in either hand and landed repeatedly only to be outslugged and outgamed.

The radio announcer told his audience that:

"The Iron Man looks surly, friends. I'd hate to be in O'Keefe's shoes."

One of Morgan's helpers called to Coke and handed him two envelopes. Jimmy Pappas opened them for him. One was a cablegram from Coon. It read: "We figure you can't lose. Best regards." The other was a telegram from Rose. "Get it over quick and come home to mama. Will be listening in. Love." Coke tore up the two messages and threw them out of the ring.

"Are you O.K., champ?" Jimmy inquired, noticing how Coke's face had darkened.

Coke nodded.

While they were tying on the gloves, Regan talked to Coke, who paid no attention to him. O'Keefe came across the ring and put his arm around Coke.

"Champ," he said, "we'll be at it in a minute. That handshaking before the go don't mean nothing. Let's shake hands now."

"Get the hell away from me," said Coke.

"Naughty," said Regan.

A score of flashlight pictures were taken, then the referee ordered the ring cleared. A long hush followed this order. Coke got up, pushed his stool out of the ring, and rubbed his feet in the rosin. O'Keefe followed his example. They were both on their feet leaning against the ropes when the bell rang. Then just what the crowd was waiting for happened. Coke leapt across the ring, his chin on his chest, crouching, like a predatory animal, caught O'Keefe coming out of his corner and drove him to his knees with body punches. O'Keefe weathered the first rush, got his balance and clinched, but Coke clubbed him, forced him to the ropes, and landed repeated, stinging blows to the body. Before a minute had passed, O'Keefe was fighting entirely on the defensive, ducking, sidestepping, swaying, blocking, parrying, back-pedaling, tripping over his own feet, even covering up so long that the crowd booed. Coke was all over him, swinging punches from every angle, wide open, stamping around the ring, panting like an animal.

O'Keefe seemed bewildered, absolutely unable to cope with the most violent and homicidal attack seen in the ring since the Dempsey-Willard fight. When the bell rang for the end of the first round O'Keefe went toward Coke's corner, but Coke turned him around and gave him a shove. The crowd cheered.

"Well?" Jimmy demanded.

"He's tough," said Coke. "I licked Bat Cahill with less than that."

"Don't you think you better slow down a little, champ?" Jimmy inquired. "That's a hell of a pace you're setting."

But Jeff winked at Jimmy and shook his head. Coke said nothing.

At the beginning of the second round O'Keefe leapt out as fresh as ever, grinning, with his long left out as far as it would go. He was taking no chances this time and met Coke in the center of the ring and stopped a rush with his left. Coke took a hard left on the forehead without wincing and bored in. But O'Keefe arched his body away from body punches, leaned forward from his hips up, and drove a hard right to the side of Coke's head and followed it with a smacking left. Coke kept coming and took two or three more hard blows to land a stinging hook that sent O'Keefe into a clinch. Coke clubbed him all over the ring, landing one blow that looked very much like a rabbit punch. The referee warned him. O'Keefe landed with a left that smacked all over the Ball Park. Coke missed a counter and, off balance, was hit with a right which turned him

half around; but he landed a lucky punch straight from the shoulder at this angle and O'Keefe went down. Resting on his hands and knees, grinning at Coke, he took a count of nine, then leapt into a clinch, and getting a hand free, hammered Coke about the head. The ringside was in an uproar and hats sailed into the air. This was no murder; this was a contest. At the end of the round O'Keefe danced to his corner. Coke swaggered across the ring and was cheered by the crowd.

"Yours by a mile," said Jimmy.

"Yeah," said Coke.

But he was thinking that O'Keefe was just about the toughest boy he'd ever fought. His legs were tiring. He wondered if it wouldn't be a good thing for him to stall. Let O'Keefe, who seemed willing enough, set the pace for a while. He said nothing to his seconds, but he decided to stall for a couple of rounds and maneuver O'Keefe into a series of left hooks. He had two knockdowns to his credit already and even if he lost the next two rounds he'd still be even.

But O'Keefe crossed him. At the beginning of the third round he began to stall, and run, refusing to lead. Coke, as champion, had to carry the fight. He rushed O'Keefe and hammered him, but O'Keefe had a way of arching his body that made him hard to hit. Coke was at a loss. O'Keefe clinched frequently and hung heavy on Coke, whose legs were tiring. Once or twice he was lucky enough to get a hand free and make the going tough for O'Keefe when he clinched. But in general O'Keefe stalled successfully through the third round,

also the fourth and fifth; never leading, hanging on, taking a good deal of punishment, but able to stand it, worrying Coke with his arched body, and occasionally landing a stiff counter. Coke began to lose confidence in his own generalship, and when he went to his corner at the end of the fifth round he said to Jimmy:

"How does it look?"

"Well," said Jimmy, "you've got every round so far. But from the crowd it must look pretty bad. He's tying you up, Coke. How's the legs?"

Coke hesitated, then said:

"Getting tired."

Jeff looked at Jimmy. They said nothing.

"What do you think I better do?" asked Coke.

Jimmy didn't know what to say.

"What do you think Jeff?" he demanded.

"Well . . ." said Jeff.

"Good God," said Coke, "you guys ain't worth a damn. I'll just go in and kill him, that's all."

"Don't talk so much," said Jimmy. "If your legs are getting tired, maybe you better try to finish it."

The bell rang. Coke bounded across the ring as he had done in the first round, caught O'Keefe by surprise and landed a hard left hook, followed by a terrific right to the head. Coke had seen Prince Pearl and Mike Shay drop before these two punches; he thought the fight was nearly over. But O'Keefe grinned and bored in. Coke clinched and thought: "Christ, I must be losing my steam!" The referee pulled them apart and Coke rushed in to try his favorite punches again. But

O'Keefe shot his left down at the angle that had worried Cahill so much, and Coke went back on his heels. Cursing and panting, he went after O'Keefe, driving him all over the ring, landing on his biceps, his elbows, his gloves, but failing to connect with one clean blow. Toward the end of the round, Coke maneuvered O'Keefe into a corner and peppered him; but O'Keefe, timing Coke's right correctly, sidestepped it and Coke fell into the ropes. O'Keefe took advantage of this break and kept Coke on the ropes, beating him about the body. For the first time in the fight, Coke covered up. At the bell he was on the defensive and taking a beating.

People in the crowd began to look at each other in surprise. What had happened to the Iron Man?

The radio announcer told his listeners that O'Keefe had shaded the champion in the sixth round.

Coke sat in his corner staring across the ring at O'Keefe, who seemed fresh and was grinning at someone in the crowd. Coke hated this tough, freckled kid. He wanted to see him stretched out bloody and helpless on the canvas. Suddenly he thought about Rose. He'd never see her any more. She and Lewis would live together now and give him the laugh. Mrs. Lewis would get a divorce; there would be a big scandal. Everybody would be laughing at the champion who wasn't man enough to hold his own wife! At the champion? Champion no longer if his legs didn't improve or if he didn't knock O'Keefe kicking in the next round. A fine mess he'd made of things. He was alone,

alone. Tears of rage came to his eyes. The bell rang.

Coke leapt out of his corner and attacked O'Keefe with all the ferocity he had shown in the first round; but O'Keefe weathered the rush easily this time, sidestepping, clinching, countering, his head high and his left ripping up for the body. Coke began to tire. Even the radio announcer noticed it and communicated his discovery to his listeners. Coke clinched and held on, his legs wavering. The referee pulled them apart time after time, and warned Coke again about the rabbit punch. But Coke was fighting for his life now, and paid no attention. The referee warned him repeatedly. But Coke was all fighting man now and was out to win, no matter how it was done. The referee didn't know what to do. He couldn't disqualify the champion; the crowd would mob him, but he couldn't let O'Keefe get the worst of it. O'Keefe solved his problem for him by using the punch himself. The referee sighed with relief and let them rabbit-punch as much as they pleased. O'Keefe, noticing the look on Coke's face, was fighting his best. He had been warned to watch out for Coke when be began to tire, or seemed beaten, for at such times he was more dangerous than others. Coke was landing his hook now, and although it had lost some of its steam, he was hurting O'Keefe, who once flinched very noticeably. Toward the end of the seventh round one of Coke's rushes was stopped by O'Keefe's straight left. Coke staggered. O'Keefe saw his advantage and rushed in, landing a right to the head and a left to the

pit of the stomach. Coke turned sideways, took a right on the chin and fell. The bell rang.

Coke leapt to his feet and swaggered to his corner. The crowd cheered.

McNeil worked fast over O'Keefe, whose body was covered with big, red splotches.

"Best boy in the ring," said O'Keefe.

"Shut up," said McNeil. "You got him. He's about all in."

Coke had a cut over his right eye and blood was trickling from a split lip. He lay back on his stool gasping for breath. Jeff knew he was licked but Jimmy was so excited he didn't know anything. He got out the courtplaster and fixed the cut over Coke's right eye.

"Put some over my other eye," said Coke. "Don't you know nothing?"

Jimmy obeyed without understanding.

"You want to make a target for him," said Coke.

When the bell rang for the eighth round Coke rushed O'Keefe, but there was not much violence in the rush and O'Keefe fell into a clinch. Coke tried to punish him with a free right hand, but he was arm weary. O'Keefe got away from him and hit him with a light right and a hard left. Coke fell into a clinch to rest his arms, but he found that his legs were wavering. In a sudden excess of rage he wrestled O'Keefe all over the ring, O'Keefe scarcely resisting, except to keep Coke from getting an arm free. The referee pulled them out of the long clinch and warned Coke

about the wrestling. O'Keefe landed a light right and then a glancing left which hurt Coke, who followed him flatfooted, trying for a knockout. O'Keefe tried to feint Coke into a right lead, but Coke wanted to land the left. O'Keefe rushed him, but Coke crossed him by sidestepping with an agility that surprised O'Keefe, who was thrown off balance. Coke saw his advantage and landed a right swing that swished through the air. O'Keefe was flung across the ring and into the ropes. The crowd stood up and yelled. But O'Keefe, cursing, bounded out of the ropes and rushed to the center of the ring, where Coke met him. O'Keefe, like Prince Pearl, Bat Cahill and Mike Shay before him, lost his head and stood slugging toe to toe with Coke, who landed his left hook cleanly at last and followed it with a right which glanced off O'Keefe's head. O'Keefe kept his feet and hung on, groggy. The bell rang. Coke staggered to his corner, cursing. It was all over. He'd missed his chance. If O'Keefe came up fresh for the next round, he was through. He sank down on his stool.

"You got him, champ," cried Jimmy. "You got him sure."

Jeff put his hand on Coke's shoulder and smiled at him.

"Best round you ever fought, Coke," he said, but Coke paid no attention.

He kept repeating to himself a single phrase. "I shot my bolt, I shot my bolt." O'Keefe was too tough for him, toughest guy in the world. He had landed enough

clean punches to lick Cahill, Savella and Larsen rolled into one. The kid just wouldn't drop and stay down. Coke glanced across at O'Keefe. He was already sitting up on his stool, grinning. Coke felt a sudden lassitude; he felt old and worn out. He wished it was all over; then he could go home and lie in the dark. That's what he wanted to do, lie in the dark. He glanced up at the powerful white light over the ring. Beyond that was a cloudy, summer sky. He could see the flash of matches in the far off dark bleacher seats. He glanced down into the ringside. Men were staring at him with set faces. Did they know it was all over?

When the bell rang for the ninth round, a damp wind sprang up, and it began to drizzle. Coke came out of his corner with his chin on his chest, bobbing, weaving, scowling. He saw that O'Keefe was cautious, and didn't seem anxious to mix it. A sudden hope filled him with strength. Maybe he would win; maybe he could pull this one out of the fire. He'd done it before. But there was that freckled kid with the big shoulders and the little legs, young Fitz they called him, dancing in front of him, grinning, moving about as if it was the first round instead of the ninth. Coke rushed in wide open, panting and stamping heavily on the boards; but O'Keefe met the rush coolly, stepped back and to the right and landed his left. Coke staggered. His legs were giving out. There wasn't a good round in them. O'Keefe hit him with his right, then his left and right. Coke staggered and turned slightly sideways. O'Keefe hit him a right uppercut and suddenly the ring turned a

somersault. Coke reached for something, the ropes maybe or O'Keefe's arms, but missed and felt the canvas under his hands. He heard a long dim roar and glanced up, but the light hurt his eyes. The roar continued, getting closer. He heard someone saying: "Six, seven, eight." Christ, he was being counted out! He felt water on his back. What was that? Rain. "Nine!" He leapt to his feet and put his arms around a blurred figure in front of him. But the blurred figure jerked away from him, he staggered forward two steps, then something hit him a terrific smash on the jaw. He felt the canvas under his hands again; heard the dim roar which gradually came closer; felt the rain on his back. "Nine!" By God, they couldn't count him out. He got to his feet and began swinging his fists; one of them landed. But he couldn't see. How come he couldn't see? Something reached out of the darkness and belted him on the jaw. He felt the canvas again, but under his back this time; he heard the dim roar but it was receding now, and the rain was falling on his face. "Nine!" Hell! Up again. Wouldn't this round never end. But somebody had him by the wrist, pulling him to his feet. The fight was over.